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TIME PIECE

by

NAOMI JACOB

NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1937

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NAOMI JACOB

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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLOTTE MARDEN stood in the bay of the big window and stared out miserably at the garden which, on this November afternoon, looked particularly dreary. The tall elm trees swayed before the onslaught of the north wind, grey clouds went scudding across the sky ; the whole world seemed to have been robbed of its colour and painted a sad, melancholy shade of dunnish grey.

Charlotte shivered. How she hated Yorkshire, and how often she compared it regretfully to the wide green Weald of Kent, where she had lived before her marriage with Thomas Marsden fourteen years ago ! Viewed in retrospect, Kent, and more particularly Tunbridge Wells, seemed to assume all the characteristics of an earthly paradise. Not even the lapse of fourteen years had reconciled Charlotte to the cold winds, the long winters, and the blunt speech which belong to the Broad Acres.

As she stood staring out at the wind-swept garden, her eyes filled with tears. She was a delicate woman, whose energy had been sapped by overmuch child-bearing, and whose self-confidence had dwindled through being left to spend most of her days alone. Now her thoughts turned back and she reviewed the last fourteen years, as she so often did during the hours when she sat alone in the big, rather bare drawing-room at Marlingly.

She remembered her mother's comfortable, warm and entirely conventional house with its brisk, well-trained maids. A house where everything seemed to move on oiled wheels, where each day brought its appointed small tasks and duties. How happy she had been with mama and Harriet ! Then Harriet had married Captain Monash, and gone to India. They had never seen her again, for she had died when her first child was born. So Harriet had become a memory, had

always been referred to as "Poor Harriet", or, "Our lost darling"; for a time life had been robbed of its laughter, and Charlotte and mama had draped themselves in crape and heavy black, and listened to assurances of sympathy from their friends.

Harriet had been dead for a year. Charlotte had been permitted to lay aside her heavy mourning and wear black and white, and sometimes even a touch of mauve, when Thomas Marsden had been visiting an old friend of Mrs. Pickering's in Tunbridge Wells. They had met Charlotte walking along the Pantiles and Thomas Marsden had made no attempt to conceal his admiration. He called at the house to see mama and brought Charlotte roses. She had felt it was impossible that a handsomer man could exist as he stood on the hearthrug in the drawing-room, his fine figure encased in a tightly fitting morning-coat, his large tie with the cornelian pin, his narrow white cuffs which protruded from his coat sleeves—all contriving to make him appear more distinguished than he really was. Not that Thomas lacked good looks. His hair was bright, a reddish gold—more gold than red—his eyes were very blue, and his mouth wide and ready to smile.

In less than a fortnight he had asked Charlotte to marry him, and they had stood together before mama and explained that they loved each other very dearly. Mrs. Pickering raised no objections, though she insisted upon an interview with her lawyer, Mr. Carter. Thomas emerged from this interview with flying colours, and he and Charlotte were officially engaged.

They were married in the September, and he carried Charlotte to the north assuring her that he was the luckiest man in the world, and saying again and again: "I know that you'll love Marlingly—no one could help loving the place. It's—well, Lottie, it's home! There you have it."

Charlotte had stared at the long, two-storeyed house built of grey stone with something approaching dismay. It was two miles from the nearest town of Marbury. The little village, Marlingly, was scarcely more than a huddle of cottages presided over by an old Norman church and a vicarage which hid behind a wall of laurel bushes and a tall yew hedge. The flat,

Georgian front seemed to her to be singularly bleak and unfriendly, the stone-flagged passages, the low wide stairs, and the huge kitchens where red-faced country girls bobbed and wished her a greeting in a dialect so broad that she could scarcely understand what they said, were all foreign to her.

Thomas talked excitedly, pulling her gently from room to room.

"That's a Lely—pretty, isn't it? Mrs. Claudia Marsden—painted in sixteen hundred and something, I can never remember dates. This is our room, dearest; look—you can see right over the moors, away to Cradlethorpe and Seston."

Charlotte stared out at the distant moors, flaming in royal purple against the pale blue of the autumn sky. Hers was that type of mind which distrusts and dislikes wide spaces, preferring the narrow security of streets and hedged roads.

"My dear mother used to stand at this window for hours," Thomas said. "She always said that on a still day she could hear the hum of the bees gathering honey in the heather! Now come and see the rest of it. . . ."

That night, as she lay in the huge four-poster bed, Charlotte knew that she hated Marlingly—knew that she feared the wide moors, disliked the great swaying elms, the flagged passages, and the broad, heavy voices of the maids who waited on her. To Thomas it might be—home; to her it was nothing more than an ugly old house, set in a dreary waste of unfriendly land.

Her first child, a daughter, had been born within a year and named Harriet. Thomas had been disappointed and had not tried to conceal his feelings. Her recovery had been slow; he hated illness and grew restive when she wished to do nothing but lie on a sofa and read the novels which mama sent from Tunbridge Wells. He possessed a considerable amount of land and spent much of his time riding round the farms, superintending the cultivation of the land which belonged to the home farm. Day after day he would burst into the drawing-room, bringing with him, so it seemed to Charlotte, a gust of cold, harsh air, asking in one breath how she felt, and explaining in the next what work had occupied him during the day. He was a popular fellow, with many friends, and though at first after their marriage he had delighted

to take her to dine at their houses, after Harriet's birth he began to leave her a good deal and go off to play cards with Wilson of Hartburn, Thorpe of Brigend, Veysey of Clartbeck, or Bower of Seston.

Her evenings were often lonely, but she preferred them to the nights when Thomas invited his friends home to Marlingly. To Charlotte these yeoman farmers were dull fellows, heavy in thought and slow in speech. They seemed to her to belong to a different world from the one which she had known in Tunbridge Wells, seemed to be made of coarser clay than the men she had met in Kent. They sat playing cards in the library, smoking and drinking, and from time to time their voices would reach her as she sat in the drawing-room, raised in argument, laughter, or sudden bursts of anger. She always went to bed long before they left, and when Thomas joined her she suspected that he had drunk more than was good for him.

"Do you play very high?" she asked him once.

He frowned, and paused before he answered. "Not particularly."

"What do you play?"

"Whist."

She felt comforted—whist was such a respectable game, and surely one could not lose very much. She said to Thomas: "Well, you can't lose very much at that, can you?"

He came over to her, laughing rather like a schoolboy caught in a piece of mischief, and pinched her ear gently.

"Can't you? You know all about it, Lottie, don't you? You try playing a pound a trick and a fiver on the rubber, my little dear!"

In 1866 her second daughter was born. Thomas stood staring down at the little crumpled red face.

"Another girl, eh?" His face showed his disappointment. "I thought you'd have managed a boy this time, Lottie. Ah, well, never mind; we're both young—that's one good thing."

They named the child Claudia, after the beautiful Mrs. Marsden who had been painted by Lely. She was a handsome little creature, with her father's red-gold hair and blue eyes, self-willed, impatient of discipline, and full of vitality. Charlotte's third child was born two years later, and proved to be the boy

for which Thomas had longed. She was terribly ill, and even the old doctor—Rawlinson—shook his head and advised Thomas not to allow his wife to have any more children.

“What, never ?” Thomas exclaimed in dismay, for like most of his generation he found something meritorious and altogether admirable in a large family.

Rawlinson scratched his stubby chin. “I don’t say never,” he said. “I only advise her to rest for a bit. This last birth tried her pretty hard.”

Thomas frowned anxiously. “That doesn’t mean that the boy’s delicate ?”

“No—only that his mother is. She’ll get over it, give her time.”

However, during the nine years which followed Robert’s birth, Charlotte had five other children, none of whom lived longer than three months, and who drained her of what vitality had been left to her. At thirty-five she had lost her looks—though she still possessed a certain rather faded attraction—and she had almost forgotten what it felt like to be really well and strong. Most things had become an effort ; she suffered from terrible headaches, her back often felt as if it would break in two, and she slept badly. Yorkshire no longer stood for a county which she disliked in her mind, it had become a kind of ogre which had robbed her of her youth and health.

Thomas still loved her in his rather easy-going fashion. He spent very little time at home, but when he returned there he was usually good-tempered and sufficiently kindly. He still retained a certain physical attraction for his wife, and when he chose to make love to her she forgot the many shortcomings which were contributing to make life at Marlingly increasingly difficult. For Thomas Marsden was a gambler, and found life insupportable without the excitement of betting, card-playing, and risking money which he might have used for more profitable purposes. He was almost invariably unlucky and, like the majority of his kind, always believed that one day his luck must turn.

When he had married Charlotte Pickering he had been something of a landowner, his rents had been considerable, and his farms kept in good condition. Soon after the birth of the

second child, Claudia, he had sold Clay's End, to pay the debts which he had incurred over the Derby. The money which remained after the debts were paid was gradually frittered away, most of it finding its way into the pockets of Wilson of Hartburn and Thorpe of Brigend. By the time little Robert was nine years old, the estate had been reduced to three farms only: Potter's Orchard, the home farm, and a wretched handful of acres, poor ground with a small and inconvenient house, known as Cloddingly.

He mentioned none of these sales to his wife, holding that women knew nothing of business matters, and that it was a pity to worry them about things which they could not possibly understand. Thomas still believed that one day his luck would turn, and in consequence made no attempt to cut down household expenses—except those which did not affect his own comfort. He kept a weight-carrying cob—for he was growing heavy—for road work, a couple of hunters, and only put down the two horses which had drawn his wife's Victoria, retaining a raking chestnut for the high dogcart.

Charlotte watched, and, without actually understanding, realized that their life was changing. Thomas no longer gave her the money for the monthly books readily, with a joke upon the admirable manner in which she controlled expenses. He scowled at the little red-covered books, flicking over the pages, and exclaiming: "Good God, Lottie, do we live on fish?" or: "Do the children spend their lives drinking beef-tea?" He always gave her the necessary money in the end, but always with warnings that she must try "to keep within bounds" and "watch those damned servants or they'll have us in the workhouse".

"Tell me exactly what we can afford each month," Charlotte begged, "and I shall see that the books are kept within that sum."

"Tell you! My God, how can I tell you?" he demanded. "I'm not a housekeeper. How should I know? I only object to waste!"

As Charlotte stood at the window on this particular November afternoon, the thought of those books was uppermost in her mind. They had been placed on her little walnut

Main

desk that morning and lay there in a small but ominous stack, waiting for Charlotte to present them to Thomas that evening. Unwillingly her eyes turned to them and she sighed. If he happened to be in a good temper, things would be easy enough. He would make her add up the totals, make fun of her when she counted on her fingers, and finally, glancing at the full amount, he would grimace with mock dismay and assure her that she would ruin him. She would laugh and say, "Oh no, Thomas—don't say that even in fun." The whole business ended in laughter and sometimes a few kisses, given with the declaration that she was "as pretty as ever, damn me if you're not!" Those were the good evenings.

On the other hand, he might scowl. "Those damned books again! It's not a month since I paid them! My God, what robbers these tradesmen are! It's no use, Lottie, we can't do it. You'll have to keep within bounds, I've told you before."

"But what are the bounds, Thomas?" she would ask.

Then he would snap his fingers, click his tongue in irritation, and tell her not to talk like a fool. "The bounds—well, anything that is reasonable; not this wild extravagance, Lottie."

Such occasions generally ended with Thomas ordering his horse and riding over to Clartbeck, where he stayed playing cards with Veysey and his sharp-nosed sons until the small hours.

A noise in the hall made her turn from the window, and a moment later the door was flung open and Claudia and Robert burst in. They were handsome children, tall for their age and well built. Robert had his mother's soft dark hair, while Claudia's hair shone bright gold, and her eyes were the colour of cornflowers.

"Mama, mama, will you walk with us to meet papa?" Robert cried. "He said that he'd be riding back along the highroad this afternoon. He promised that I might ride Hector up the drive. Do come, mama." He caught her hand and laid it against his smooth cheek, cuddling to her, while Claudia stood smiling expectantly. Both children loved their mother devotedly, and had she not listened to their pleadings

that she would walk with them, Charlotte would scarcely ever have left the house.

"Where is Harriet?" she asked.

"Miss Baxter thinks that she has a little cold," Claudia said. "She said that she might stay in, and that if you were coming with us she would stay with Harriet. Do come, mama. It's not raining."

Charlotte looked from one to the other. She did not want to go out, but she could not bear to disappoint the children. She nodded.

"Very well, Claudio, run upstairs and bring me my bonnet—the one with the dark-green strings—and my heavy coat——"

"And muff, mama," Robert urged. "I like to put my hands in it when they get cold."

Claudia rushed away, returning with the clothes. Charlotte, as she put on the bonnet before the big glass over the mantelpiece, reflected that neither Harriet nor Robert was as quick as Claudio. She seemed to have the ability to do anything in less time than either her brother or sister. Claudio never seemed to walk, she ran. Her brain, her mother thought, kept pace with her feet, flying from one subject to another, never stumbling or hesitating.

The three left the house and made their way down the wide drive bordered with overgrown laurel bushes. Both children chattered happily: Robert of the expected ride on Hector, Claudio of her morning's lessons.

"Mama, need I learn to knit? There are so many other things I want to learn. I hate the feeling of wool on my fingers. You know I hate wearing woolly gloves, don't I?"

Charlotte said weakly, "Oh, Claudio, I think it's nice for girls to know how to knit."

"But I do know how to knit," Claudio objected. "I knitted a pair of garters and a kettle-holder. Now I want to leave it alone and do other things."

"I don't have to learn to knit, do I, mama?" Robert said with the smug pride of nine. "That's girls' work. Boys learn to ride horses."

"Don't be a little stuck-up beast!" his sister said. "Boys' work—girls' work! When you can ride as well as I can you

can pat yourself on the back. Boys only learn *some* things—girls learn what's supposed to be their work and boys' as well."

"Don't quarrel, darlings. Look, Robert, run to the gate and see if you can see papa coming."

Robert's small, straight legs flashed down the drive ; he swung upon the gate, peering down the road, then screamed with delight.

"Here he is, here he is !"

Thomas Marsden rode towards the little group. His face was flushed by the keen wind, his eyes danced, and his lips parted in a smile. Charlotte gave a small sigh of relief. This was one of his good days. He got off his horse, kissed the children, and lifted Robert into the saddle.

"Can I ride him to the stable, papa ? Look, here's Withers to lead him. May I, papa ?"

Thomas shouted to the groom who came running down the drive, "Here, lead Hector in, Withers. Master Robert'll ride him back for me. No, young fellow, keep those hands of yours down, and sit up. That's better. Off you go !" They stood watching Robert sitting proudly on the big horse. Thomas laughed, and laid his hand on Claudia's shoulder.

"He'll never have the seat you've got, Claudie ! She ought to have been a boy, Lottie."

"I'm very glad that she's a girl," Charlotte said. Then quickly : "Oh, my dear, here's a funeral."

Thomas stared down the road, the laughter gone from his face. He had a superstitious horror of funerals, and a genuine fear of everything connected with death. On the other hand, as the Squire of Marlingly, he could not turn and enter his own gate, turning his back on the approaching procession, without hurting the susceptibilities of some of his tenants or their friends.

"Confound it !" he muttered, snatching off his hard-crowned hat and assuming an attitude of respectful attention. "Stand still, Claudie ; they'll be past in a minute."

"Whose funeral is it ?" Charlotte whispered.

"I don't know. Someone from over Brigend way. They always bury them here at Marlingly."

The little, rather shabby procession drew nearer. The

coffin was being drawn along on a wheeled bier by six countrymen, their heavy faces expressionless, their bodies moving stiffly in their thick black clothes. Behind the coffin, which bore no flowers, came an old man, holding a little boy by the hand, and behind them again came the other mourners, mostly elderly women, some of whom sobbed noisily.

Claudia watched the little boy, as he trudged along with the old man. He was crying bitterly, and she noticed that his hands were red with cold. From time to time he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and once the sound of his crying reached her. Instinctively she pressed closer to her mother. As if to reassure herself that the grief which she witnessed could not touch her, she looked up at her father and mother, finding comfort in the fact that they were both with her.

The old man trudging along with the little boy turned his eyes towards the little group at the gate. His whole body stiffened, and Claudia heard his voice, rasping and hard, speaking to the bearers.

"Let t' coffin be, lads, fur a minute!" He spoke with harsh authority, and obediently the men checked the wheeled bier and turned their heads to watch him. He stepped out from the procession and walked towards Thomas Marsden.

It seemed to Claudia that her father shrank back as the old man drew nearer; then recovering himself, said, his voice sounding queerly unreal, "Ah, Blenkiron, I hope that——"

The other man held up his hand, commanding silence. For a few seconds it seemed that even the trees stood still, that the keen, blustering wind dropped, that the faded leaves ceased whirling along the highroad.

"Thomas Marsden," the man cried, "Ah stand 'ere ter call thee bi thy reit names—adulterer, fornicator, murderer! Does tha knaw 'oo lies i' that coffin theer? Ma douter—an' not aloane. T' child lies wi' 'er. Seem'ly one wasn't enoof fur thee!" He swung round, pointing to the little boy who stood rubbing his eyes and sobbing loudly. "Theer 'e is—thy son! Fruit o' thy wickedness. Then tha mun come 'anging rahnd agean—visiting 'er at hours when decent men ween i' theer beds—now see ween she lies, wi' thy child along wi' 'er. Curse thee! Curse thee fur the shame tha's brout

on me an' mine. May the Lord deal wi' thee ; may the Lord remove thee fra the land, fra the plaace that knaws thee, and out o' the mind o' men. May thy 'ouse be left unto thee desolate, an' thy name be wiped out fra the plaace that now is thine. May thy childer be fatherless an' thy wife a widder."

He paused, and Claudia saw that a white foam had gathered at the corners of his mouth ; he stood there shaking, swaying a little, his eyes fierce and relentless. One of the bearers came forward, touched his shoulder, and whispered : "Naay, cum away—nout's ter be gained bi ganner on this road." Without another word the old man allowed himself to be led away, and the procession went on its way.

Charlotte took Claudia's hand in hers, and said : "Come along, Claudia. It's time we were walking back."

Obediently Claudia entered the gates, her mind consumed with curiosity. She was just a little frightened ; the old man had looked like the pictures of the prophet Isaiah in the huge family Bible, his voice had sounded so angry, his eyes had seemed like little darts of flame.

"Mama, what was the matter with that man ? Why was he so angry ? What did he mean—about murderers ? Mama, tell me !"

"I don't quite know myself," her mother said, and looking up, Claudia saw that her lips were shaking.

Thomas walked in front of them. He had forgotten to put on his hat, he held it in his hand, swinging it as he strode along. The wind ruffled his hair, making it shine, Claudia thought, like gold. The poor little boy who had cried so, and rubbed his eyes with red, cold hands, had hair like gold too. It had blown about in the wind just as papa's was doing now. They reached the house, and Charlotte bent down and, holding Claudia's face between her hands for a moment, whispered :

"Darling, go up to your bedroom and wait for me. I'll come very soon. I don't want you to speak to Harriet, or Robert, or even Miss Baxter until I've talked to you. I trust you, Claudia, remember."

Claudia nodded, feeling important but still just a little frightened. "No," she said. "I won't—I won't speak to anyone. Don't be very long."

As Charlotte entered the drawing-room, her husband stood with one foot on the fender, staring down into the heart of the fire. He did not move until she was quite close to him. Then he turned, frowning and angry.

"That's a pretty kettle of fish ! Old Blenkiron, half-cracked fool of a Methody preacher. Damn the old brute !"

Charlotte met his angry stare calmly. She felt quite consciously unmoved, and, realizing her feelings, wondered a little.

"Is it true ?" she asked.

His control vanished. "Is what true ?" he shouted. "What d'you mean—is it true ?"

"Is it true that you are the father of that little boy, and of the baby that died and is buried today with its mother ?"

The cool, even tones of her voice stilled his anger. He stared at her in blank astonishment. He was not accustomed to his wife asking questions. Rather, she had always waited for him to give her such information as he felt fit ; for years she had known nothing of his private affairs, and had accepted such crumbs of news as he gave her with regard to himself and his business with suitable gratitude and meekness. Now he met her cool and eminently steady eyes, and the thought came to him that he was facing a woman he did not know. Had she cried he might have comforted her, tolerantly but with a shade of impatience that she should attach any importance to the ravings of an old local preacher. She might even have condoled with him that he should have been subjected to the humiliation of such a scene, in which case he might in return have admitted a certain lapse from conventional morality, and expressed his determination to "do something for the boy". He had, as they walked back to the house, imagined such a scene, when he had pictured himself making admissions, based on the statement "the woman tempted me". Nothing was working out as he had planned. He did not speak, only continued to stare at Charlotte, blankly and rather stupidly.

CHAPTER TWO

LIKE so many men of his type, Thomas Marsden was deficient in moral courage ; he had a dread which almost amounted to terror of scenes of any kind, and at that moment he felt that a storm was about to burst over Marlingly. He stared at Charlotte, trying to keep his eyes steady, trying to read what was going on in her mind. He realized that denial was useless. The boy who had walked behind the coffin "fathered himself", as the country people said of any child who resembled its father. On the other hand, to admit the truth of Blenkiron's assertion might cause the storm to break.

He remembered how often he had heard Charlotte refer to her own father as the most upright and honourable of men. She had declared that he was her ideal of all that a man ought to be. Once he had tried to tease her, hinting smilingly that, conceivably, there had been times when the late Robert Pickering had "shaken a loose leg like the rest of his sex". Charlotte's eyes had blazed, her face flushed with anger, she had for once forgotten her gentleness and ordered him never to speak of her father in such words again.

"To even hint such a thing is disloyal ! Unthinkable ! Almost unforgivable, Thomas !"

He decided to resort to frankness, and an appeal to her understanding.

"Look here, Lottie, don't take it like this. Life isn't so easy for a healthy, active fellow as you women think. Men don't look at these things as you do, it's something which——"

"Then it is true ?"

He stared at her, his lips pouting a little like a sulky, overgrown schoolboy. "I suppose so——"

"Both those children are yours ?"

"You've no right to talk to me as if I were a prisoner in the dock and you a hanging judge !" he burst out impatiently.

"Damn it, how do I know? I'll admit that probably the elder one is mine, but how can I tell about the last one? She was anyone's money—common to half a dozen men in the district."

Charlotte sat down and folded her hands. Her voice was still unmoved.

"I don't really think that matters," she said. "I mean if it was your child or not. It's dead—fortunately, poor little thing! What does affect me is that you admit it—might—have been yours. I mean—" Her face flushed suddenly. "I mean, you have visited this woman."

"Oh, the devil take it—yes!" Then, coming nearer, he dropped his voice and spoke gently. "Lottie, don't be hard on me. I admit that it was unpardonable—but surely understandable. After Harriet was born you were ill for a long time, and nervous. Then, during these last years, you have been laid up a good deal and I hated to bother you. You see that, don't you?"

"I only see one thing," she said. "That you understand how I feel when you use that word—unpardonable. That's what it is to me, that's what it will remain."

His mouth opened, he stood there aghast and shaken. "You're not going to make a scandal—leave me, are you?"

For the first time her lips curved into a smile. "I—make a scandal! No, I think I can safely leave that to you, Thomas. I shan't leave you, but—I shall never live with you as your wife again. Never. I couldn't, because I don't feel that I really know you. You're a stranger to me; all these years I've lived with a man I never understood. I had no knowledge that—men could behave as you have done—and still pretend to love their wives."

The assurance that she was not going to leave him gave Thomas the stability which he had lost. He squared his shoulders, threw back his head and looked less apprehensive. "Never live with you as your wife again" meant nothing, nothing more than an expression of disapproval of his past conduct; it contained no real threat for the future. He felt that dignified magnanimity met the case.

"Lottie, I know that I've behaved badly, infernally badly. I deserve your anger and indignation. I can only say that

I'm sorry and that this will never happen again. I've learnt my lesson, and—well, I accept my punishment."

She rose and stood before him, looking very tall and slim. Thomas thought how attractive she still remained, how well she wore her clothes, how clear her skin was, and how bright and beautifully tended her hair.

"Aren't you going to have tea ?" he asked. "It's tea-time, and a cup of tea would do us both good."

Charlotte thought: 'And then they accuse women of believing tea to be a panacea for all ills ! How like Thomas ! He could so easily sit down now and talk happily over tea and buttered toast and forget all that has happened. I don't know whether to be sorry for him or to congratulate him.' She said: "I must go and speak to Claudia. The poor child was terribly upset—over what happened."

"Good God, you're not going to discuss this with Claudia ?" Thomas's face was swept by a wave of scarlet indignation.

"I am not going to tell her the truth," Charlotte answered.

He sighed with relief. "That's all right then."

Claudia was seated at the window of her bedroom, watching the evening shadows creep over trees and lawns, over hedges and the distant moors.

Her mother entered quietly and went over to where she sat, laying her hand on the child's shoulder. It was characteristic of Claudia that she did not start, neither did she revert immediately to the matter of old Blenkiron ; she caught her mother's hand and held it against her cheek for a moment, then nodding towards the window, said: "Nice out there, isn't it ? I think, often, that evening's a kinder time than afternoon."

"Perhaps," Charlotte agreed. "I've come to tell you about that old man, Claudi."

Claudia nodded. "Oh yes. I didn't like him much, did you ? I was sorry for the little boy, weren't you, mama ?"

"And for the old man. He was mad with grief, I think, at losing his daughter. He didn't quite know what he was saying. Grief does sometimes make people like that, you know."

"Does it ?" She seemed to have lost interest in old Blenkiron. "Poor old man ! Will he look after the little boy, mama ? And, oh, what is a fornicator ?"

Charlotte was shocked, and a wave of indignation against her husband rushed over her. Through him Claudia had heard these terrible words, and was impelled to ask this difficult question. All her rigid upbringing, all her unwillingness to face life, facts and unpleasant realities, asserted itself. She knew that her face reddened, knew too that Claudia's sharp eyes noted the change.

"It's—it's someone who commits one of the deadly sins," she said at last.

"And had papa committed a deadly sin?"

Again Charlotte knew that her indignation shook her. Again she heard her father saying in his precise, gentle voice: "Never allow yourself to tell a lie, Charlotte. Nothing can need a lie."

"The old man—perhaps—believed that he had. I've tried to explain to you, Claudia. Now don't let us talk of it any more. These things are sad, and terrible, and better forgotten."

That night, when she faced her husband from the foot of the table, Charlotte Marsden wondered at his easy laughter, his amusing conversation. It seemed that the events of the afternoon had passed over him and were forgotten. He sat there with the light catching his bright hair, his eyes dancing, his lips parted in a smile. It was as if he exerted all his charm, trying to re-establish himself with her.

Watching him, she knew that his charm, his gaiety, and even his affection could never touch her again. He had been a stranger that afternoon, and a stranger he should remain. Brought up in a home where morality was strictly defined, where good and evil were never permitted to be anything but easily recognizable, where rules were made to be kept, and where the frailties of the flesh were regarded as something to be frowned upon, and offenders against convention referred to as sinners, her whole soul had revolted at the discovery that Thomas had been unfaithful to her. It was impossible that the man she had believed him to be could have so transgressed. Therefore she had been utterly mistaken in her judgment of him, she had never known him, and now she felt that she saw him for the first time as he was, and what was more—felt no love for him.

Charlotte Marsden felt soiled and degraded. She found

herself wondering how often Thomas had returned to her after having held this village girl in his arms. How often he had pressed his lips to hers while an hour before he had kissed the firm, red cheek of Blenkiron's daughter. Other thoughts pressed in on her, thoughts so terrible, so revolting, that she could have screamed in genuine horror.

Thomas Marsden saw none of these things. Lottie had apparently recovered from her temper. Not that she had been wrong to be angry. He had behaved badly, and admitted it frankly. Damn it, no one could say that he hadn't admitted his faults, and promised to amend them! Women looked at these things differently; it was only right that they should. No one, no decent man, wanted his wife to actually condone such offences; but having taken one's whipping, having expressed regret, there was only one thing to do—forget the matter and go on as before. Not that he felt his conduct had been particularly blackguardly. Men were men, and he'd always been full-blooded and vital. Nothing anaemic about him, thank God! The girl hadn't been a virgin when he first met her. He recalled Thorpe of Brigend once asking him that question.

"By God," Thomas had cried in indignation, and even now he recalled that indignation with some sense of pride, "I'm not that kind of a scoundrel, Thorpe! I never started any girl on the downward path, and never will."

Thorpe, always a bit coarse-fibred, had replied that someone had to be first, he supposed.

"Possibly," Thomas said, "possibly. Only I'll take damn' good care it's never me. I wouldn't have that on my conscience!"

He had thought that Ellen Blenkiron had left the place for good when he gave her fifty pounds for the boy, and advised her to go and settle somewhere else. Then last year she'd returned, bringing the boy with her. Nice little boy, straight and upstanding. He had meant to do something for him. Charlotte had been ailing, always lying in a room with the blinds down, complaining of headaches, backaches. He'd been sympathetic, kind, and considerate. Confound it, that was just what had led to all the trouble, that consideration of his! The more he thought of it, the more convinced he became

that he had fundamentally behaved pretty well. He'd been the victim of circumstance, that was all.

That night they sat in the drawing-room, and Thomas did his best to hide the restlessness which always consumed him after dinner, when he thought of the cards at Veysey's, or the talk of racing that was occupying the men who would have gathered in the saloon bar at the "Crown" at Marbury. He did his best to conceal it, and even asked Charlotte if she'd like a game of cribbage.

"No, thank you. Aren't you going out, Thomas?"

"No, I don't think so. I thought we'd have a nice quiet evening alone tonight, eh?"

"Just as you like. I shall go to bed early. I'm tired."

Soon after nine she gathered together her sewing and said good night. For a moment he wondered if she were still nursing a grievance against him, if she still had some foolish idea of keeping to what she had said that afternoon. One glance at her face reassured him. It was placid and unmoved. He looked up from his paper, smiled, and said, "Good night, Lottie. I shan't be so long, myself."

Charlotte mounted the stairs and entered the unfamiliar best bedroom, where she had placed all her own things. There was the photograph of mama and papa, in its velvet frame ; pictures of her three children ; and her own brushes and toilet articles. She was doing a daring thing and she knew it, but she turned back from the dressing-table and quietly locked the door before she undressed, said her rather stilted and excessively long prayers, then climbed into bed. There, lying very straight with her hands clasped, she waited.

She heard Thomas come upstairs, heard him enter the room which had been theirs, and even heard the sudden exclamation which escaped him. He walked over to the door of the room where she lay, turned the handle and tried to open it. Three times he did this, as if he could not believe that it was possible for his wife to have locked her door against him.

"Lottie," she heard him whisper furiously, "open this door."

She moistened her lips. "No, Thomas. Go away and don't disturb the children, please."

"Then open this door, d'you hear?"

"No—I shall not open it."

"By God, I'll break it down!"

She felt certain that he would not risk the consequences of doing that. Lying very still, she waited ; and presently with a whispered oath he went back to his own room.

The next morning he greeted her with a scowl. "I've got something to say to you, Lottie. I'm not going to be denied entrance to my wife's room. Just understand that. I—will—not—allow that sort of thing."

"I warned you yesterday, Thomas. I only kept my word. I shall never live with you again as your wife. On that I am determined."

Once more her coolness overcame his anger. He could have dealt with fury, with reproaches, but this calmness puzzled him.

"I'm not sure that the law isn't on my side!" he exclaimed.

She poured out coffee, and said, without raising her eyes : "Very possibly." Then as she passed him his cup, she added : "Even the law cannot force me to live with you, and—I say this quite seriously—I would rather kill myself than do so."

"You know where you're driving me, don't you?" Thomas demanded. "And mind this, everyone's sympathy would be for me. Not a soul in Yorkshire could blame me. I didn't marry to live the life of a hermit, did I?"

"Apparently not."

"Very well." He helped himself to bacon and eggs with an air of finality. "Very well. Now I know where I stand. Never again will I try to enter your room. I don't suffer that kind of insult twice, you know. That's over, and I shall go my own way. You understand me?"

"Perfectly."

But there were many nights when Charlotte Marsden heard him try the door of her room, and never again, so long as she lived at Marlingly, did she neglect to lock that door when she went to bed.

For some weeks Thomas assumed an air of haughty indifference, scarcely speaking to her, going about his business, never mentioning anything of his doings to her. Gradually he grew tired of this proud aloofness, and more than once tried to make advances to her which were almost pathetic in their frankness.

"Lottie, let's be friends again. I hate this life."

"But we can be friends, surely."

"Not—living like this. It's impossible. I'm miserable."

"Thomas"—she laid her hand on his arm—"try to understand. You're asking me to do something which is mentally, physically, and—spiritually impossible. I am your friend, I want to look after your house, I love the children. . . . But the rest—that's over. Can't you understand?"

Then his anger flared once more, his face became heavy and congested, his blue eyes very hard.

"Damnation, what is there to understand? You refuse to do your duty, to keep the vows you made when I married you—for what's nothing more than a whim! It's a damned disgrace."

"You broke those vows first," she reminded him gently.

"Oh, have it your own way! What the hell do I care, after all? There are as good fish in the sea—and you know the rest."

Slowly his resentment died. Probably he found the other women he talked of, for certainly he took to staying away from Marlingly for longer and longer periods. When he returned, often nervous and complaining of headaches and indigestion, which Charlotte knew were caused by his having drunk too much, he was glad to be with her, and even began to discuss his projects and his business with her. They were never lovers again, but there existed a certain solid, unimaginative friendship between them which grew with the years.

True there were scenes when she reproached him for selling land, and later for selling pictures and silver to pay his gambling debts; but gradually she grew to accept him for what he was—a gambler who always believed that his luck would turn. Each year he told her of this colt, or that mare, which was certain to do great things; she heard of how the Derby was to be won by a horse starting at immense odds, only backed by the favoured few, of whom Thomas Marsden was one. The same applied to the Lincoln, the National, the Ebor Handicap. Charlotte Marsden, who hated gambling and hated racing, grew to know the date and name of every race in the calendar. She never upbraided him for his faith in these horses, never expressed her detestation of the life he lived.

Only when Claudia, at thirteen, announced that: "Hutchins

told me that 'Golightly' is a cert for the St. Wilfred Plate, at Ripon. He says the stable are backing it", did Charlotte speak what was in her mind.

"Claudia, never let me hear you mention racing again in this house," she ordered. "I say nothing to your roaming about the countryside like some ploughboy, but racing gossip I will not permit."

Claudia pushed back her red-gold hair and stared at her mother.

"But, mama"—her eyes were full of astonishment—"papa talks nothing else. Hutchins says that he's a proper punter, a racing head."

For the first and last time in her life Charlotte laid her hand on her daughter's shoulder and shook her. "Be quiet, do you hear? I will not allow it, and if I hear that you discuss such things with either Harriet or little Robert, I shall punish you severely."

"Very well, of course I won't. Not that Harriet would want to. She's so busy learning to do crochet and twist her hair into ringlets, and Robert doesn't care for anything except taking clocks to bits to make water-wheels. Don't worry, mama, of course I won't."

Her mother relented a little; she always relented when she had been angry with Claudia—the child was so eminently reasonable.

"You don't understand, my darling. I can't explain."

"You don't need to," Claudia said easily. "I know that papa is terribly unlucky." With sudden gravity: "I can't think why he never backs a winner; except when he brought off that big win for the Waterloo Cup." Then, catching sight of her mother's face, she said quickly, "I am sorry, mama, there I go again! Only you see I do want to know all I can about everything. You must do if you want to hold opinions, you see?"

Charlotte sighed. "I wish you would try to know a little more about the nice things that Harriet does. Look at her beautiful fancy-work, and the charming handkerchiefs she embroidered."

"I know," Claudia agreed. "I do admire Harriet awfully, only I can't be like her. Papa says that I ought to have been a boy."

Suddenly Charlotte caught her daughter to her. "Thank God you're not!"

So Claudia continued to spend the least possible time at her lessons and every moment she could in the fields, on the farms, or begging her father to let her ride out on the heavy old cob. She was a magnificent child, with brilliant colouring and a beautiful carriage. Afraid of nothing, she made friends with everyone, and yet while her temper would flare and blaze at the slightest hint of cruelty or injustice, she never bore malice, and never harboured resentment. Her love for her mother was almost pathetic in its protectiveness, her affection for her brother Robert almost maternal. Only for Robert would Claudia consent to darn, to replace lost buttons, or to mend rents caused by brambles and briars. Her father she treated as she might have behaved towards an elder brother—for whom she felt some affection but towards whom she acknowledged no particular duty. She walked with him, laughed with him, and discussed his past bad luck and problematic good fortune for the future, but she never looked up to him, and even when he issued commands she listened with a slight, tolerant smile and either obeyed or disregarded them as she thought fit.

"Confound it, Claudia," he said one day, "I believe you think I'm a fool!"

"Oh no, papa, not a fool!" she assured him. "Only I think you often speak without thinking, don't you?"

It was said quite frankly, without a hint of impertinence or precocity, and Thomas Marsden, who admired his younger daughter and scarcely admitted even to himself how much he longed for her to return that admiration, laughed. The girl had enough guts for twenty. Pity she'd not been born a boy. Robert was a clever lad—his reports from school proved that—but he was too inclined to be pernickety, he disliked mud, rain, hated wind, and shivered in the cold. Like a cat, always seeking—and finding—a warm place by the fire, working away with bits of wire, little cog-wheels and screws. Harriet was pretty. He shouldn't wonder if she married well, and did something to put Marlingly on its feet again. She'd make the kind of wife a man wanted. Gentle, biddable, ready to listen, and pleasant to the eye.

He stood looking down at Claudia now, smiling, and thinking that whoever married Claudia wouldn't find her so easy to handle. She'd get the bit in her teeth and be off like the wind. She'd need a man who could "hit her and hold her", or there'd be trouble. Even at thirteen you could see that. Too much red in her hair for her not to have a touch of the vixen in her. He stretched out his hand and caught hold of one of the strands of red-gold hair which fell on to her shoulder. Pulling it gently, he said: "Love your old father, Claudiie?"

Without force, she drew the hair from his fingers and answered seriously:

"Yes, I think so. I like you very much. I understand you, you see."

He laughed. "The devil you do! Who told you that?"

"No one. I just know that I do. I think that you . . ." She paused and he said with sudden interest: "Go on, Claudia, tell me."

"I think that you want everything made easy. You don't fight! You'd rather let things go than fight to keep them."

His face clouded. He forgot that he was talking to a child of thirteen, to his daughter, and that his proper course would have been to speak sharply to her, telling her to mind her own business. There was something in the clear, bright blue eyes that made Thomas Marsden wish, with an intensity almost painful, that he hadn't made such an obvious mess of his life, that he hadn't sold Clay's End and Hutchinson's, that he had relied less on cards and race-horses to make money for him and more on his own individual efforts.

"I dunno," he said. "Maybe I haven't thought things worth fighting to keep. Fighting's a tiring game, y'know."

Claudia squared her shoulders suddenly and flung back her head with a movement that was half impatient. "Well, I'm going to fight," she said. "I've made up my mind; and I'm going to make Robert fight, too."

Marsden's sudden gravity had passed. "What are you going to fight for?"

She saw that he was laughing at her, and scowled up at him, her scarlet lips pouting, and turned away whistling to Vanity, the mongrel whippet she had begged from the tenant at Potter's Orchard.

Marsden noticed the scowl and read her annoyance in the sudden twist of her body. His temper rose, and he called to her : "Claudia, I thought I told you I'd not have that mongrel bitch about the place. We shall be overrun with puppies before we know where we are. Tell Hutchins to get rid of her."

Claudia turned and spoke over her shoulder. "She keeps the rats down in the hen-house. Hutchins says there isn't another bitch like her in the three Ridings. She earns her keep, he says."

"You heard what I said, didn't you ?" he shouted. "Get rid of her !"

"Yes, I heard," she said, "but"—very slowly—"I shan't do that ; and when you think it over you'll see that I couldn't. It wouldn't be fair, just because she doesn't happen to have a pedigree."

For a moment their eyes met, and they faced each other as if each fought for domination. The child's eyes never wavered, and after a moment the man's eyes fell. He swung off and walked away from the girl and her dog.

Claudia thought, as she went back to the stable-yard : 'Poor papa ! I don't think he gets much fun out of things. He hasn't got any idea of authority. He gets all angry over stupid little things, and lets the big things slide past him.' In her heart she was sorry for him. He was obviously deteriorating. His hair was thinning rapidly, his fresh-coloured face was becoming heavy and dull, his bright eyes were dimming, the whites yellow and bloodshot. Even his hands had lost their steadiness, as his lips had lost their firmness. He looked what indeed he was, a disappointed man, who by his own weakness had allowed life to beat him to his knees. He was past fighting ; all that he could do now was to make spasmodic and rather foolish efforts to retrieve the fortune which he had lost.

Claudia felt these things without being able to put them into words, and the knowledge irritated her, making her call sharply to her brother Robert, who was strolling to meet her : "Robbie, put your shoulders back, don't slouch !" In her own mind she felt that only weak people slouched, and Robert should never be weak if she could make him strong.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Harriet was nearly eighteen, her sister considered her the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. In Claudia's eyes nothing could have been good enough for Harriet. She knew that money was becoming less and less plentiful at Marlingly. Miss Baxter had left them a year before, and there had been no talk of replacing her. Robert was at school, and Claudia knew that there were always discussions and difficulties over his school fees and the clothes which constantly had to be replaced because he grew so quickly.

Potter's Orchard and the snug and profitable little home farm had both been sold ; there were gaps on the walls where the little Constable, the reputed Murillo, and the indisputable Lawrence had once hung. The exquisite Chippendale desk and four chairs had disappeared, as had the great silver tankard from which Charles the First was reputed to have drunk wine, on his way to the north, when a loyal Marsden had offered his King hospitality.

Harriet's birthday passed, and more than once her mother had hinted to Claudia of the necessity for her elder daughter to go out into such society as the district offered.

"Oh dear," Charlotte sighed, "it's so difficult. Mama is goodness itself, but it would grieve and distress her to know —well, to know just how things are here, Claudie." Then quickly, laying her hand on Claudia's hard brown one : "Dearest, I don't know why I talk like this to you, but you do understand, and you are such a comfort. I don't know what I should do without you, I'm sure."

Claudia drew down her well-defined eyebrows and sat with her chin on her doubled-up fist, trying to understand what ought to be done to give her beautiful sister every opportunity to make her entrance into local society. To her it seemed just a little foolish, but then she loathed dances, and parties of

any kind appeared to Claudia to be the most elaborate form of torture. Hot rooms, noisy music, too many lights, and crowds of people whom you didn't know and, even when they were introduced, whose names you could never remember. Still, if mama believed that this kind of amusement was necessary for Harriet, then Harriet must have it.

"Would it cost an awful lot, mama?"

Charlotte shook her head. "Not really, Claudie, only the difficulty is that there is so little. Harriet must have dresses, and—really we ought to entertain here. Papa is still the Squire of Marlingly, even if he hasn't an acre of land except Cloddingly and the actual house and gardens. How can either you or Harriet meet people? What chance will either of you have of marrying well?"

Claudia nodded. "I see. You want Harrie to get married, mama. How queer!"

"Why queer, dearest?"

The girl flushed. "I don't know, mama, only I didn't somehow think that you'd found marriage very happy—and yet—oh, I can't say what I mean."

For almost the first time Claudia watched the veil fall from her mother's heart, and heard some of the stored-up bitterness of the past nineteen years.

"Happy!" she exclaimed. "There has been very little happiness. And now, every day, poverty drawing nearer and nearer—through nothing but your father's selfishness and laziness, his gambling and racing. Can't you see that I long for both you and Harriet to find safety, each to find a good man—someone like my own dear father, if that were possible—who would make you both secure?"

"Someone who would keep us—"

Charlotte frowned. "That's not very prettily said, Claudie. Someone who would love you, care for you, and make you happy. That's what I want."

"But Robert won't have to find a wife to keep him, will he?"

"My dear child! Really, Claudie, sometimes you are almost stupid! Robert will earn his own living and, I hope, earn sufficient to ask some nice girl to marry him, and to look after her."

"Um—I see. It might be better if girls earned their own living. I don't see why they shouldn't, do you? I should think men must get a bit sick of working and keeping women for nothing except to have children. They might both work, I'd think."

Charlotte was genuinely shocked. It seemed to her that there was a curious streak of brutality in Claudia, which at times came perilously near the truth. She disliked to hear child-bearing referred to so lightly, and in such a matter-of-fact way. This was the result of allowing the child to run wild, talk to all and sundry, and chatter freely on any and every subject.

She did not reply, and Claudia stood up, stretched her arms above her head, and said: "I'll see if something can't be done, mama. I'll talk to papa."

That night Claudia waited up for her father. He returned to Marlingly soon after eleven; the rest of the household were in bed. As she heard his steps in the hall she realized that they were not too steady.

"Poor papa!" she said softly. "He won't be a bit pleased at what I'm going to say."

Thomas Marsden entered the drawing-room and stood in the doorway, swinging a little on his heels. To Claudia he looked like a fine picture which someone had partly obliterated, destroying the sharp outlines, robbing the colours of their brilliance. Even his clothes had lost their shape and hung on him, loose and badly cared for.

He said: "'Lo, Claudie! Sitting up for your old father? B'God, I've had a wonderful evening! Be'ner's luck, they tell me. New game, new to me that is, called poker. Most 'citing. Get a drink for me, will you, there's a good girl."

She brought him a whisky-and-soda and sat down opposite to him.

"Win a lot, papa?"

He set down his glass and said with an air of triumph: "Fifty of the best."

"I want more than that—I want a hundred; better still, a hundred and fifty."

Marsden stared blankly. "Good God, Claudia, have you

taken leave of your senses? A hundred and fifty? What the devil d'you mean?"

Very carefully she explained, reminded him of Harriet's age, of her beauty, her undoubted attraction, and of the necessity of giving her opportunities to meet people.

"Match-making, Claudio?" he grinned. The effect of what he had drunk was wearing off, and he sat half-sunk in his chair, looking old, grey-faced, and tired. He listened to her explanations in silence, then lifted his hands in a little gesture of protest. "It's impossible! I've got this fifty pounds. I want that to pay bills."

"But you never do pay bills," Claudia objected. "You only pay part of them and then order so much stuff that you're deeper in debt than you were at first. Very well, then, if we haven't got the money, you must sell something. Harriet must have this chance. She's young, she's lovely, and she shan't spend the rest of her life growing old and withered and dried-up if I can help it!"

"If there was anything worth selling, m'dear, I'd have sold it months ago."

"There's 'Mrs. Claudio Marsden'—sell her."

"The Lely?" He shifted in his chair. "No, damn it, I've been keeping that for you, Claudio! You're called after her. I've hung on to it for you."

"You might just as easily have hung on to the 'Charles' tankard—the Marsden who had it first was called Robert," she retorted.

"No; you're like the Lely, same hair, same eyes." He laughed. "I'd not wonder if she hadn't your temper! Oh, we'll keep her, I think."

Claudia got up and came to where he sat, laying her hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, papa," she said. "That's nothing but sentimentality. You happen to rather like me, partly because I'm cheeky and know my own mind; but it's no good being full of sentiment when there is something to be done. It's only right to give Harrie what she wants most, and in order to do that we've got to be practical. We used to have lots of lovely things—well, they had to go. People who can't run their lives properly,

forfeit the right to keep silver, and furniture, and pictures. They have to turn them into money so that they can live. 'Mrs. Claudia' must go up to London, and she will pay for Harrie's dresses and a ball for her, and suppers and dinners."

"Here!" he exclaimed. "Balls and dinners—here at Marlingly? There aren't enough glasses to go round, the crocks are all chipped, and the knives have yellow handles! Damn it! Why can't your grandmother help?"

"Because mama says that to know—how things are, would distress her."

He nodded. "Your mother's probably right."

"It makes me impatient," Claudia said, as if she were speaking her thoughts aloud. "I want Harrie to have everything, but I hate the pretence. We shall have new dresses, we shall have people to dinner, and dances, we shall spend all this money on—pretence, pretending to be better off than we are, or ever shall be, so that some man will want to marry Harriet. We might spend the money in repapering the rooms or mending the roof, or restocking the garden. We're always so busy bolstering each other up. Mama says that we mustn't worry you. You don't tell mama that you've sold the three-acre because she might be worried. I don't tell her that I must have new boots because I know she'd get that frown between her eyes. And so it goes on. Why can't we all tell each other the truth and try to get things straightened out?"

Her father was filling his pipe, his eyes intent. He spoke without lifting his eyes:

"I don't quite know, Claudio. It's a kind of elaborate game. I suppose that there are husbands and wives who tell each other everything—it might be rather nice. I've never done it, never could bring myself to. There, run along to bed, and I'll attend to 'Mrs. Claudia Marsden' in the morning. I believe old Jimmy Bower at Seston might buy her. He's always admired her."

"Then let's go over tomorrow and ask him," Claudia said.

He shot a quick, almost startled glance at her. "Oh, so you want to come too, do you? Afraid that I shouldn't play fair, eh?"

"Oh, you'd want to, but you might not be able to," she

said. Then, with a smile which made her father realize that before long this long-legged girl would develop into a very lovely woman, she added : "You see, I'm so practical ; you're not, papa."

As she bent to kiss him, Marsden said gently : "Nice of you to say that, Claudie, bless you ! Gilding the pill for your old father, eh ?"

So the next morning, seated in the high, shabby dog-cart, which had once been so smart, with the raking chestnut in the shafts, Claudia and her father drove over to Seston in the bright October sunshine. Claudia sniffed the air delightedly, her eyes shining with appreciation, her cheeks vivid. Over everything was the hand of autumn, everywhere there was colour, and the splendour of the turn of the year, as if autumn determined to prove that her beauty was greater than that of her sister—summer.

"I like autumn," Claudia chattered gaily. "It's a richer time than summer. Summer is all green, hiding the shapes of the trees, making the country rather—fuzzy. Autumn is richer, gives you gold and red instead of green, and knows how lovely the trees are without all that jumble of leaves. If I ever went away from Marlingly, I should get dreadfully homesick all the time, but most of all in September and October."

Seston was a huge barracks of a place, built in the true Victorian style with what seemed to Claudia hundreds of windows, not one of them of decent size. It was filled with heavy, Victorian furniture, ugly, well-made, and comfortable. Every table carried its burden of splendidly bound books, arranged in neat piles ; there were what nots and newspaper racks, ornaments, vases filled with pampas-grass, and china cabinets stocked with distorted pieces of china possessing nothing more than a sentimental value.

James Bower had inherited a huge fortune from his father, a successful wool merchant, and having given generously to the Party Funds, had been rewarded with a baronetcy. He had turned the wool business into a company, of which he was chairman, and retired to Seston, which his father had built two years before his death.

Sir James—known locally as "old Jimmy Bower"—had

tried to persuade his son Edward to adopt no profession but that of country gentleman, but Edward had preferred to strike out for himself and had opened a factory at Crudlethorpe, where he made—and sold most successfully—modern agricultural implements and dabbled in other forms of commercial machinery.

Sir James greeted Marsden with great heartiness. He was a tall, over-stout man, with huge hands and protruding blue eyes.

“Nice to see yer,” he boomed. “I thought after last night you might be a bit under the weather. Know what I mean, eh, Thomas? Well, what’s ter do? Business? That sounds bad, only as you’ve brought Miss Claudia with you I can’t believe it’s anything but summat very pleasant.”

Marsden explained, a trifle awkwardly, that he wished to sell the Lely. Times were bad, crops not what they might have been, prices low and tenants difficult. Claudia, watching both faces of the men, thought again what an elaborate game they played.

“Sir James knows that father’s got no money, he knows how he’s lost it. Father knows that he knows, and yet they’re both wasting time playing this silly game of pretence. He’s actually sympathizing with father over the difficulty of selling grain that he knows father hasn’t got!”

“Ay, difficult days! Very difficult days, and not likely to get better. Wages going oop and prices cummen’ down. Well, I should like the picture, Marsden, I allus coveted it. It’s the prettiest painting here or hereabouts. Now let’s cut the cackle and cum ter the ‘osses, and cards on t’ table. What’s the price?”

Marsden said, in the accepted formula of the north: “To you, Jimmy, it’s two-fifty.”

To which Bower replied, in the equally accepted retort: “Ay, and what’s it ter anyone else?”

It was Claudia who said quickly: “To anyone else it’s two hundred and fifty guineas, Sir James.”

His starting blue eyes fairly goggled in admiration. James Bower knew how to drive a bargain and respected anyone who was as quick as himself.

"Ay, is that soa?" Then, smiling, "An' if you sent it up ter Lunnon, Miss Claudia, what d'you reckon you'd get?"

"We should put a reserve of three hundred on it, Sir James."

He jerked back his head on its thick, scarlet neck, opened his mouth and gave a bellow of laughter. "My word, Thomas, you oughter let this one run your business for you. She'd make brass for you, choose how! Is that your last word, Miss Claudia—two-fifty?"

"My last word, Sir James."

"Reit!" He was lapsing into the dialect which was his natural speech, as he always did when he forgot that he was a baronet and the owner of Seston. "Now we mun clinch t' bargain." He rang the bell, and when a footman, who was palpably a country lad and not too easy in the position in which he found himself, entered, he ordered: "Fetch t' decanters, and tell Mr. Edward that I'd like to speak to him, and luke sharp ower it." As the door closed he said to Marsden: "Know yon chap? 'E's George Harrison's eldest lad. Ah've stuck him inter livery, but Ah doubt as he'll never shape for private service. Ower much West Riding loam still sticking ter 'is boots. Ah, here's Edward!"

Edward Bower was everything that his father most admired and respected. Tall, inclined to be florid, with fair hair and a drooping yellow moustache, of which he was very proud. In his uniform of an officer of the Yeomanry he looked what his father termed "a fine figure of a man", but the suit of rough tweeds which he wore that morning seemed to lessen his height and make his broad shoulders look out of proportion. He was thirty-two, and had never caused his father a moment's anxiety. Clever in nothing except his own work, he was admittedly one of the most successful mechanical engineers of his day. He had no vices, and yet had contrived to avoid the stigma of priggishness. He came forward, smiling a little, and offered Thomas Marsden his hand.

"It's t' young lady Ah've brought you in to see, Teddie," James Bower said. "Miss Claudia, this is my son, Edward. Now, Edward, while Marsden and I discuss t' state of t' crops, you might show Miss Claudia t' green'ouses. Happen you

might come across a few peaches or some grapes." He turned his huge bulk towards Claudia, smiling broadly. "D'you like peaches, luv?"

"Very much indeed, thank you."

Edward, watching, thought: 'She's trying terribly hard to be grown-up!'

Together they made their way to the conservatories of which James Bower was so proud, Edward lumbering along in his thick tweeds and the heavy boots which he always wore in the country, Claudia in her tight-fitting jacket, patterned with rather rubbed and shabby braid, her dark-blue skirt bunched out at the back in the stupid fashion which distorted the best and most slim figures, her little hat tilted over her face, and her hands carefully clasped because she knew that her gloves needed mending at the finger-tips.

Edward uttered trivial remarks rather ponderously. "Lovely morning. Real October morning, Miss Marsden."

"Yes, beautiful."

"You must have had a pleasant drive over."

"Yes, charming."

"The autumn colours of the trees are wonderful, don't you think?"

"I do, indeed. Yes, wonderful."

Suddenly she gave a little splutter of laughter, and Edward, staring down at her in astonishment, saw that she held her handkerchief to her face, saw, too, that her neat, well-shaped ears were scarlet.

"What's the matter, Miss Claudia? I say—you're not ill—I mean—"

She stretched out her hand blindly and laid it on his arm.

"No, of course not. Only"—again she gave way to helpless laughter—"only we were so solemn, and I wondered if you'd ever say anything that I could disagree with." She put her handkerchief away and met his serious stare, her eyes dancing. "It was funny, wasn't it?"

"Now you put it that way," he agreed, "I suppose it was. It's difficult to know exactly what to say—just at first, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I always talk too much. I didn't talk too

much this morning, though. We came over to sell a picture to your father." She laughed. "Do you know, I sold it? Yes, I did. I knew that my father would muddle it all, so I just said how much we wanted and stuck to it."

"And did my father buy it?" Edward asked.

"Yes; they're clinching the bargain now. It's a Lely, Mr. Bower. Have you ever seen it?" She sighed. "Oh dear, I shall miss her. She's so pretty, and I do like pretty people."

Edward said heavily: "They say—like to like, don't they?"

"You mean that I'm pretty? I'm not bad; my hands are too big and too brown, and I don't take enough care when I put on my clothes. You should see Harriet, my sister. Oh, she's lovely! Pink and white, with soft hair and lovely eyes. Harriet always looks as if she'd been bathed in dew and dried by the sun—do you know what I mean?"

Edward did not know in the least. He was the most unimaginative of men. He only knew that he liked the reddish sheen on Claudia's hair, and that although the keeper was waiting with his guns, he had no intention of leaving her.

"Tell me more about the picture," he said.

"It's an ancestress of mine—Mrs. Claudia Marsden, painted by Lely. She's supposed to be like me, or I'm supposed to be like her. We've got to sell her, you see, because . . ." She stopped, and Edward prompted her:

"Because . . .?"

"Well, because we haven't anything else much left to sell, and Harriet must have dresses, and papa must give a ball for her and entertain a little. It's only fair, she must—meet—people."

Half an hour later he took her back to the house, leaving MacNeil, the head-gardener, scowling and sulking because Edward had insisted on robbing him of his choicest flowers, peaches and black grapes. In the hall, with its staring black-and-white patterned floor, with its antlers and fox masks, brushes and stuffed fish in cases, Edward halted for a moment.

"I hope that when the picture comes here you'll come and see her sometimes. I promise to take great care of her. . . ."

He was rewarded by the brilliant smile which Claudia

Marsden could bestow on those who roused her sympathy or gratitude.

"Thank you. I shan't forget that. I wanted to tell you to look after her, only I thought you might think that I was stupid or cheeky, or just silly."

"I couldn't think you any of those things, believe me," he said heavily.

That night, at dinner, James Bower told his son of the interview which had taken place concerning the picture.

"Hard luck on poor old Tom Marsden. Never has any luck, and can't leave cards and 'orses alone. Got to sell his pictures to bring his elder daughter out. Pretty girl, Teddie."

Edward, his eyes firmly fixed on his plate, replied: "Charming!"

"We might give a dance here. Never entertained much since your poor dear mother died. Nice change, eh?"

"Yes, why not, indeed?"

The old man chuckled. "You might do worse, Teddie. Time you were married. They've no money, but they're good, solid stock, decent folk. You provide the brass, she'll bring the looks."

For the first time Edward raised his eyes, startled and amazed.

"But—but she's only a child—not sixteen, guv'nor!"

"Nay, Tom told me this morning she's turned eighteen—Oh, you've got me wrong, Teddie. You thought I meant the little red-haired 'un who was 'ere this morning? Noa, I mean 'Arriet. Eh, yon's a proper piece that is. Up and bargained wi' me like a good 'un ower the painting. Well, what d'you think about the other one—make a very pretty Lady Bower one day?"

Edward smoothed his fair moustache. "I think not," he said. "I shan't think of marrying for a good many years yet. The works take up most of my time. Once they're properly on their feet I might think about it."

So "Mrs. Claudia Marsden" was sent to Seston, and Thomas handed over two hundred pounds to his wife to spend on launching Harriet into the world. Claudia had insisted on

that sum, declaring that it was a pity to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your own way, Claudio, only what's going to happen when you want dresses and dances and all the rest of it?"

"Don't worry, papa. I shan't want them. I'll look after myself."

For the weeks that followed, the whole house seemed to Claudio to be filled with clouds of muslin, tulle, and yards of ribbon ; pins, hooks and eyes appeared on every carpet, and everywhere there was a subdued sense of excitement and expectancy. Her mother was like a different creature. Her lassitude disappeared, she was eager, interested and energetic. She planned, ordered, wrote letters and sent out invitations. Harriet, content that she was the centre of attraction, behaved rather like a prospective bride, and grew, it appeared to Claudio, prettier than ever. Her smooth cheeks were invariably a little flushed, her soft eyes very bright and her hair shone with a new lustre.

On the night of the first and last dance which the Marsdens ever gave, dressed in white, with bunches of blue velvet ribbon draped on her skirt, on the tight-fitting bodice and wound in her hair, Harriet looked amazingly beautiful. Claudio did not dress until the last moment. China had been hired from Marbury, glasses had been delivered from Cater's, the china and glass shop, and the two hired waiters from the "Crown" both arrived later than they were expected. Thomas, who had not worn his dress-suit for years, was inclined to be tiresome, stating that already he felt the approaching twinges of a headache, and showing a marked disposition to stave them off by recourse to the contents of decanters. Charlotte was dressing both herself and Harriet, while Claudio, her face flushed, her hair tumbled, flew here and there issuing orders, giving instructions, answering questions, and giving the last touches to the long table which was described as "the buffet".

As she ran upstairs, hot and breathless, her mother called : "Claudia, is that you, my dear ? Do you know that it's twenty minutes to nine ? You'll never be ready !"

"Then I must be late, mama," Claudio replied, as she

rushed into her room and began to tear off her clothes. The bath-water was tepid, for the boiler at Marlingly was not capable of supplying water for more than two really hot baths, and this was the fourth. Shivering a little, Claudia wondered who had had the third. 'If it were papa, then he'll be bad-tempered for the rest of the evening,' she reflected. Back in her room her hands were cold ; she felt chilled and sticky ; as she dressed she grumbled softly under her breath. What nonsense it all was, this dressing-up, and why on earth must she deck herself out in white and primrose ribbons at nine in the evening ? White and primrose—nice racing colours, she decided, as she turned to the glass and began to arrange her thick hair. Very swiftly and exactly she worked, and the long, shining ropes of hair were tractable for once. Her mother looked into the room, agitated and excited.

"Claudie, tell Ellen to help you with your dress. I must go down. The Vicar has arrived with Edgar and the new curate —Lord Hartland's son. I dare not wait."

Without turning round, Claudia answered evenly : "That's all right, mama. I can manage. Don't forget that the claret cup is in the big cellar."

Ten minutes later Edward Bower, standing talking to Thomas Marsden, raised his eyes and saw Claudia descending the wide, low stairs. He said nothing, only ran his finger round the rim of his high, rather over-stiff collar, as if it were suddenly too tight for him.

Marsden said : "Hello, here's Claudia ! Exactly like that picture I sold your father, isn't she ?"

Edward replied : "Yes, the likeness had already occurred to me."

CHAPTER FOUR

VICTOR BROOM, younger son of Lord Hartland, had come to Marlingly as curate to the Rev. Henry Kennedy until such time as his age should warrant his acceptance of the family living in Somerset. Henry Kennedy was an old friend of his father's, and something of a scholar, and it had been suggested that Victor might improve his knowledge of the classics under Kennedy's tuition and in company with the Vicar's son, Edgar.

Victor Broom was then twenty-four, possessing considerable charm of manner which augured well for his future. He was good-looking in a slightly ineffectual fashion, with fair, waving hair, large blue eyes, and a skin which already threatened to become florid. He talked easily and well, so long as he kept within his intellectual depths, and his sermons were considered very charming. They usually consisted of a number of the more sentimental texts strung together into some kind of cohesion, delivered with a good deal of emotional fervour.

Thomas Marsden found him irritating ; Charlotte declared that he was the most delightful young man she had ever met ; Harriet followed him with her eyes whenever he appeared and Claudia, for the first time in her life, found herself standing on common ground with Edgar Kennedy in disliking him heartily.

Kennedy, a great loutish lad, growled out to her : "I could tell you a lot about him that doesn't go with that yellow hair and that namby-pamby speech of his, if I liked."

Claudia snapped back : "Then don't like—I don't want to hear."

They were skating on the pond, a week after the dance, and she had watched Victor Broom swinging round with Harriet for the past ten minutes. Against her will she had to admit that they made a charming pair, that they moved easily and gracefully, and seemed to skim over the ice without conscious effort. Poor, clumsy Edgar, who had never hesitated

to show his admiration for Harriet, stood little chance, she reflected.

She stood on the bank, ready to assist in pouring out the hot coffee which Hutchins was even now carrying down from the house. Ever since the night of the dance, Claudia had done everything to make matters run smoothly. Loving skating, she had left the ice and taken off her skates, so that Harriet should not have her enjoyment cut short by the necessity of pouring out coffee. As she stood by the steaming urn, her father joined her.

"Young Broom making all the running, eh, Claudie?" he asked.

She nodded. "Harrie seems to like him."

"Don't you?"

"Not much, papa. Still—if Harrie does that's all that matters."

"Looks as if poor old Edgar was among the also-rans."

She laughed. "The Church first, the rest—nowhere."

Her eyes wandered to where Victor Broom was helping Harriet to a chair on the bank. He bent over her, saying something which made her laugh, blush, and shake her head, then turned and came to where Claudia stood.

"Ah, Miss Claudia—a ministering angel, thou! Thank you; and may I take a cup back to your sister?"

"Aren't you skating again?"

"Indeed yes. I only pulled off my skates to come and beg for this welcome refreshment. Not too much sugar—as you have poured it out it will be sufficiently sweet already! Thank you." As he took the cup from her she was conscious that his fingers touched hers, and conscious, also, that the touch was intentional. "Aren't you going to skate with me when your duties here are over?" he asked.

In the tone which betrayed the fact that she was still scarcely more than a child, she answered half sulkily: "No, I've promised Edgar."

"Poor Edgar is not much of a performer, is he?"

"No; but he's nice. I like him."

Broom laughed. "Which almost sounds as if you didn't like me!"

She set down the cup which she held and stared at him. "Why—almost?"

He flushed with annoyance at her tone of cool insolence and, taking the cup, walked back without another word to where Harriet sat. He bent over her, conscious that here he would find no rebuff. It was obvious that Harriet Marsden found him attractive, indeed she allowed that fact to be almost too patent, and Victor Broom would have preferred to have felt a little more uncertainty as to her feelings for him. Again and again he found his eyes turning to where Claudia stood at her urn ; her slim, upright figure, the poise of her head on her fine shoulders, attracted him enormously. Harriet was charming, exquisitely pretty ; her admiration for him was evident, but Claudia stimulated him, and later, when they walked back to the house, he contrived to slip his arm through hers on one side and Harriet's on his right, protesting that the road was slippery and that they might fall.

Edgar Kennedy lumbered along on Claudia's left, leaning forward from time to time, trying to catch a glimpse of Harriet, cursing his shyness which had prevented him going round to the other end of the row and taking her arm as Broom had done. Harriet laughed and chattered, and when Broom pressed her arm to his side he knew that she returned the pressure. Claudia's arm remained stiff and unwilling, and presently she slipped from his grasp, declaring that she hated to walk in line.

Broom, piqued and annoyed, said : "Don't blame me if you fall !"

"I'm neither likely to fall, nor blame you if I do," she returned.

Harriet sighed. Why was Claudia so gauche on occasion ? Even if she was only sixteen, she surely knew better than to reply in that tone of childish rudeness. Sometimes she could be so "grown-up", so authoritative, giving orders, managing papa, helping mama ; and at others she behaved like a sulky, bad-tempered child, only fit for the school-room. Harriet set out immediately to atone to Victor for her sister's rudeness, laughing at his rather poor jokes, and hanging on his words as if he spoke with authority.

In the hall at Marlingly, Charlotte Marsden waited with tea and all the pleasant cakes peculiar to the Broad Acres. There were tea-cakes, fat rascals, singing hinnies ; there was plum cake, sand cake and even parkin. The big fire, piled high

with wood, crackled, leapt and danced, throwing long shadows into the room, making it homely and comfortable, and never actually revealing the shabbiness of the carpets and the threadbare patches on the chair-covers.

Claudia swung off, Vanity at her heels, to put away the skates. She hated to see them thrown into a corner, left there until they were wanted again, with a film of rust which would have gathered on their surface.

"Claudia," her mother called, "don't you want tea, my dear?"

"Yes, mama, when I've wiped my skates and oiled the straps. I hate to leave them. Yours will be in a frightful mess tomorrow, Harrie."

Victor Broom picked up Harriet's skates. "Let me go and wipe them for you, Miss Harriet. I can oil straps with the next man, believe me." He followed Claudia into the little room where rods, guns, croquet mallets and all the rest of the paraphernalia pertaining to sport and games were kept. She was busy polishing the blades of her skates with an oily rag when he entered, and did not look up. He laid down the skates which he carried and came closer to her, bending his fair head to watch what she was doing.

"I must see how you do it," he said. "It's evident that you are an expert. What is on the rag—oil?"

She nodded, intent on her work.

"Miss Claudia, why don't you like me?" Broom said plaintively. "I do so want to be friends."

"I don't make friends easily, I'm afraid."

"You're very good friends with Edgar; even when you quarrel with him it's in a good-natured way. That dull Edward Bower—"

Claudia's jaw hardened. "I don't think Edward is dull!"

"I think he is so dull as to be almost amusing."

She scowled. "Who cares what you think? And shut up about my friends."

Her annoyance was so childish, her full, red mouth looked so deliciously angry, and the light from the hanging lamp so caught her hair, making it shine like red gold, that Victor Broom laughed suddenly. It was rather amusing to tease her, to watch her growing angry, flushing with annoyance, her lips mutinous.

"What a rude little girl you are!" he said. "Has no one

ever taught you manners? It's quite time someone attempted to do so!"

"No one has ever made me forget my manners before!"

Again he laughed. "Then I must forgive you, and hope you'll not offend again. There!" Swiftly he bent forward and kissed her cheek; it was hot with annoyance, and very smooth beneath his lips. He moved back, watching her with amusement, half expecting her to smile shyly. He was utterly unprepared for her reaction. She dropped the oily rag and turned towards him, her eyes blazing; fury and astonishment vied with each other in her expression.

At last she stammered: "How dare you? What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Suddenly uncomfortable, realizing that this furious child was quite capable of making a most unpleasant scene, he said: "Don't be silly! It's—it's nothing! Anyone else would have done the same!"

"Nothing!" Claudia repeated. "Then there's—*something* in return!"

Raising her hand, she smacked him smartly across the cheek, so smartly that the blow stung unpleasantly. He could smell the oil on her fingers, fingers that were grimy and most unromantically hard and muscular. Confound it, the girl had a hand like a man's!

"Now go back and drink tea and munch cake!" she ordered.

Victor hesitated. What a fool he'd been to kiss her, to make her lose her temper! She'd probably go and blurt the whole story out to Harriet or her mother. Discretion was decidedly the better part of valour.

"Sorry, Claudia," he said. "I didn't mean to annoy you. I—er—I always kiss my own little cousins."

"I hope they like it! I don't! And don't call me Claudia."

"You're not going to tell your mother or Harriet . . .?" He was scarlet with confusion. How undignified it sounded!

"I shan't tell anyone—I'm not proud of it; and I'm not a sneak. Oh, do go away! If you only knew how much I disliked you!"

He returned to the warmth of the hall and, seated at Harriet's side, tried to forget that ignominious moment when Claudia's not over-clean hand had struck his cheek.

Claudia herself returned to the oily rag and her skates, pursing her lips and frowning.

'Harrie, my darling Harrie, will marry that—that thing !' she thought, and her frown deepened. 'There's something so nasty about him, something that makes me shiver. Oh dear, I wish she'd marry someone kind and rather stupid, like Edward Bower, then she'd be so—so safe.'

During the days which followed, Claudia, returning from her walks with Vanity over the grey-green fields of winter, constantly found Victor Broom with her sister in the drawing-room. To her, coming in from the clear, cold air, the heat of the room was unbearable, and there was something in Broom's graceful, lounging attitude which revolted her. How dare he sit there with Harriet, his arm flung out along the back of the sofa, his cheek almost touching hers ! The culmination of her annoyance came one afternoon in December.

The thaw had come, and everywhere the trees and hedges were heavy with moisture, the grey skies hung low over the fields, and even the busy little streams seemed to have lost their colour and rushed along, noisy and dull. The air was cold and unfriendly, and Claudia tramped along, her heavy boots coated with clay, while Vanity, soaking wet, trotted behind her, chilled and miserable. She arrived back home, took the dog to the loose box where she was banished when too muddy and wet for the house. Pulling down an armful of fresh straw, Claudia threw it down, filled the blue-and-white basin with water, and going into the harness-room returned with a broken dog-biscuit.

"There," she said, "you'll be all warm and cosy there. That's a good lass. I'll come and see you before supper."

Then she noticed a thin trickle of blood that was running down Vanity's satin-coated side and, stooping, found that there was a deep scratch in the skin. Claudia was cold, tired and hungry, and her temper asserted itself. "That's some of that damned barbed wire ! Who the devil's been putting that stuff up ? Poor old girl, I'll bathe it."

Over to the kitchen for hot water and soft rag, back to the harness-room for boric powder, then to bathe Vanity, who assumed that expression of rapidly approaching and welcomed

death, as dogs do when nothing much ails them and they are enjoying having additional fuss made of them.

By the time everything was put away, Vanity praised for that bravery which she had not displayed in any marked degree, Claudia, blowing on her fingers, walked back to the house. The warmth of the hall was pleasant. Coal might be dear, but wood was cheap enough and easy to come by—the fires at Marlingly were always magnificent. Taking off her heavy boots and putting on shabby and comfortable slippers, she entered the drawing-room. As usual, Victor Broom lounged on the sofa beside Harriet. He was holding a book in his right hand, while his left caressed her arm with a slow and almost sensuous movement. His voice, heavily weighted with expression, filled the room. Harriet glanced up and raised her hand, warning Claudia not to interrupt the even flow of poetry.

“. . . mightier power and stronger
Man from his throne has hurled,
And the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.”

He lowered his book and said: “What do you think of that, Miss Claudia?”

“Candidly, not very much.”

“The poetry or the sentiment?”

“Both—it’s not true, anyway. The hand that rocks the cradle doesn’t rule the world.”

Harriet said: “Oh, Claudia, what can you know about it?”

“What does Mr. Broom know about it?” Claudia demanded. Then, as she saw that his white, firm hand was still caressing her sister’s arm, her temper flared. “If he visited the poor people in Marbury, if he watched some of those women with eight children to keep on eight shillings a week, he’d know how much time they had for rocking cradles and how much chance they had of ruling anything! Only he doesn’t visit them, he spends his time here by the fire, reading that twaddle to you, and . . .” She stopped, then cried suddenly: “Stop pawing my sister about like that! I won’t have it, d’you hear? I won’t have it!”

Broom sprang to his feet. Harriet cried: “Claudia, how dare you?” And Claudia stood staring from one to the other,

half frightened at what she had said, half defiant and ready to burst into a fresh attack at any moment.

"I think you've forgotten two things," Broom said coldly. "The first that I am your father's guest, the second that you are speaking to a priest of God."

"I've forgotten nothing," she retorted. "Guests don't come without invitations ; and—as for the other reason—well, God's badly served sometimes, isn't He ?"

Harriet, her lovely eyes full of tears, said : "Claudia, leave the room. I shall tell mama how horribly rude you've been to Mr. Broom."

Her sister shrugged her shoulders, turned and walked out of the room. Harriet burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. Broom was at her side immediately.

"Harriet, my dearest, don't cry." Harriet continued to sob wildly. "My beloved, does it matter what that mannerless child said ? It does not affect me in the very least."

In his heart he knew that he had visited Marlingly far too often, that he had reduced his work in the parish to a minimum, and that he hated the thought of entering the stuffy and dirty cottages when he might be seated in this drawing-room, Harriet beside him, listening wide-eyed to the noble sentiments in which he liked to indulge. He had no particular wish to marry immediately ; but as Harriet continued to cry, he slipped his arm round her waist and drew her to him. As he felt her soft young body against his own, as he realized the smoothness of her skin and the beauty of her hair, he knew that his heart beat more heavily and that the sensual side of his nature asserted itself.

Young Broom was in no sense a libertine, he was only a very physically minded young man, who strove to hide what he honestly believed to be his "baser nature" under a veneer of sentimental culture and frequent insistence upon his love of art and beauty. He enjoyed talking to Harriet Marsden, who never interrupted, who was ready to accept everything he said as right and wise. He had told her of his travels in Rome, Florence, of the—strictly intellectual and artistic—delights of Paris ; and as she listened with deep attention he had felt how delightful it would be to complete her education by escorting her to these places.

Harriet, though she might be obstinate with her mother, dictatorial with Claudia, and irritable with Robert, was as clay in the hands of young Broom. She admired him intensely, she felt that he was the very epitome of culture, and was genuinely in love with him. The thought that Claudia might have annoyed him, that through Claudia's rudeness he might discontinue his visits, seemed nothing short of a catastrophe.

Victor held her more closely and, bending his head, kissed her cheek.

"Harriet," he whispered, "I have come here too often. I know it now. I came because I could not stay away, because you drew me as a magnet draws steel. I love you, I believe that you love me. Marry me and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy."

Victor Broom found Thomas Marsden surprisingly business-like. He interviewed him in the stuffy library, which reeked of stale cigar smoke, asking pertinent questions regarding settlements and young Broom's own prospects. Victor pressed for an early wedding. After all, life in the village was sufficiently dull, and he had seen a pleasant Tudor house which he felt would make an ideal home. With a pretty wife, a comfortable home, life would be distinctly more bearable.

They were married quietly in the Norman church, and Claudia declared that owing to the quietness of the wedding a bridesmaid was unnecessary. As she explained to her mother: "I don't want to walk behind Harriet and give her my moral support while she marries a man I can't stand. As the 'sister of the bride' I shall need a much less expensive dress than I should as bridesmaid—and I can help you more. Let's leave it at that."

Victor's relations swooped down on Marlingly like a flock of large, overfed birds, Claudia felt. They were charming to Harriet, but adopted a tone of slight but distinct patronage towards everything, and Claudia placed them all in the same category as her future brother-in-law—smug, self-satisfied and sensual.

Robert, home for the wedding, was her confidant. He was, at fifteen, tall for his age, and showed every promise of not only good looks but considerable charm. Claudia found herself watching him very often, planning his future, and assuring herself that he must be a success.

"Don't let those two sisters of Victor's make a fool of you, Robbie," she warned. "I know that thin-nosed type who want to pet boys of your age. Loathsome!"

Robert laughed, showing his white, even teeth. "They're all right. Bores, but not too bad in small doses."

She shrugged her shoulders. "The doses would have to be homeopathically small for me to tolerate them. Come here! Does that tooth of yours want stopping? It does. You'd better come in with me to Marbury in the morning. I've got to go in to order some more food. My hat, how these skinny people eat!"

She managed everything; managed, Charlotte admitted, with skill and economy, and yet contrived to avoid any appearance of limited means. Only Claudia and her mother knew the difficulties which they faced at that time, and how the enormous meals needed to satisfy Victor's family depleted their narrow budget.

"They may be rich, mama," Claudia said ruefully, "it may be a splendid marriage for Harrie, but I wish they'd bring their food with them, or gifts of sheep and oxen, like they used to in the Old Testament. I could watch the arrival of a flock of sheep, goats and oxen with great joy."

Charlotte said mildly: "My dear, you surely can't expect that!"

"I surely didn't expect papa Hartland and two thin-nosed sisters, and now the brother who is to be best man. It's like an invasion by the Picts and Scots—we shall be left without a crust! It's a mercy that the rest of them are going to stay at the 'Crown'. I should have had to put you in the old day nursery otherwise."

All day the house resounded with the pompous tones of Victor's father, who appeared to wish to recount in detail every debate which had taken place in the House of Lords for the past thirty years. Maud and Edith spent their time mislaying their embroidery, their gloves or their novels, and pressing Robert into their service to find them. They declared themselves to be a very united family, and they certainly seemed so. Victor's aunts arrived for luncheon. Victor's uncles drove over from Marbury and consumed huge meals, and Victor himself fluttered in and out of the house all day.

His brother, tall, with pale-gold hair, pale-blue eyes and square shoulders, drifted into Marlingly and appeared utterly at a loss as to how to spend his time. Claudia, who was in and out of the kitchen all day long, felt that she carried the whole weight of the wedding on her shoulders.

"Talk about 'not in single spies,'" she said to Robert, as he stood near her while she washed china and polished glass, "they come 'terrible as an army with banners'. Mama has to talk to that awful old man, Harrie is so besotted over her yellow-haired curate that she can't keep an idea in her head, and papa says that he will not stand being bored, and has gone off to Thorpe's at Brigend."

Robert surveyed the kitchen, the evidences of cooking, the china, the signs of feverish activity, and grinned. "Looks like being an almighty mess, eh?"

"It shan't be that," Claudia declared, "if I have to stop up all night. I won't have them go away and add pity to their damned patronage. Everything has got to be—right. Ellen, baste those chickens again. Molly, have you polished that fruit? No! Then give it to Master Robert, he can do it. Is the pastry made? Then bring in that rabbit we cooked yesterday. Tell Hutchins to bring in more small logs." She stopped, staring wide-eyed towards the kitchen door. "For heaven's sake—what's this?"

The tall, immaculate brother of Victor Broom entered, his pale eyes looking, to Claudia, incredibly stupid. He stood, his wide mouth a little open, a cigar between his finger and thumb, looking, Robert thought, just like the "mashers" in his favourite *Ally Sloper*.

"I say—I mean—oughtn't I to be here?"

Claudia said: "Why are you here? Do you want something?" It was a little too much if Victor's relations were going to invade even the kitchen!

"I'm here because I didn't know where else to go. I mean, I was roaming about, and—here I am!"

"But you've got aunts and uncles all over the place," she objected. "Can't you go and talk to them, or to your sisters or someone?"

He smiled, a wide, toothy smile; it might be inane, Claudia thought, but it was pleasantly so. "You don't know

any of 'em very well, do you ?" he asked. "I thought not. You can't talk to any of my family, they're always so busy talking at you; you see"—he came further into the kitchen—"I've only got a couple of days' leave. I didn't really want to come. I'd much rather be at Aldershot." He laughed. The sound was rather like that of a horse neighing. "I don't mind betting you wish we were all at Aldershot or anywhere else. It's frightful, descending on you like this. I told Victor so. He said the Yorkshire hospitality was unbounded. I said that in that case it was like the Hartland cheek. Victor and I don't get on awfully well, you see."

Claudia eyed him up and down. Utterly stupid, she decided, but kindly, and lacking that air of patronage she hated so much. "It's eleven o'clock," she said. "Would you like some beer and cheese and bread ? That's what we call 'elevens'. When you breakfast at eight you can do with it. Ellen, bring a jug of beer from the cellar, and some cheese and bread."

Twenty minutes later he was polishing apples, and begging that he might be allowed to help her to wash the thin old silver spoons and forks in soapy water. The kitchen was warm and friendly ; he liked this red-haired girl and her good-looking brother. They were, he told himself, real people, not trying to pretend to be anything, but rather worried and driven over this influx of visitors.

Claudia was friendly. She told him queer stories of the district, legends and old historic tales ; she talked of the way to treat dogs for distemper, and how to reduce swelling on the hocks of hunters. She explained how to prevent pipes from bursting after a frost, and how to keep kettles from growing "furred" with hard water. Gerald Broom stared, his eyes protruding more than ever, and decided that Victor had missed the "pick of the basket" when he chose Harriet. Then, as suddenly as the pleasant time had begun, it ended. She glanced at the clock, declared that she must do a dozen things before luncheon, ordered Robert to take their guest out for a walk, and disappeared up the winding back stairs with a pile of fresh linen thrown over her arm.

CHAPTER FIVE

"*THERE, mama, you look delicious ! Your hair is perfect, and no one would imagine that your dress was not in advance of the fashions, instead of being a year or two behind them. What a thing it is to be so naturally elegant !*"

Charlotte surveyed her reflection in the long pier glass and smiled. She loved clothes, she loved to know that her soft hair was beautifully arranged ; most of all she loved to hear Claudia's praise.

"*You flatterer !*" she laughed. "*Now, darling, go and dress. You will barely have time. What are you going to wear ?*"

"*Me ?*" Claudia considered with overdone gravity. "*It's difficult, mama, because Mr. Worth has not sent home my new evening-dress, and the others have all been worn more than twice. . . .*" She laughed. "*Wear ? I shall wear my one and only, and hope that the wretched little bunches of artificial flowers will look fresher than I really believe they can.*"

She stood before the glass in her own room a short time afterwards and frowned at her reflection. She thought how ugly the hard line looked at the base of her neck where the sun had tanned her ; looked at her youthful brown arms and thin brown hands with positive dislike. The tight bodice drawn round her slight figure, the little bows on the shoulders, the amount of neck and shoulder displayed, annoyed her. Why, she wondered, did one have to take off half one's clothes at the coldest time of the day ? She hated the wide skirt, with its flounce at the bottom, and the little bunches of artificial flowers and ribbon, which always looked so tumbled after she had danced half a dozen times. She had neither time nor patience to try various methods of hairdressing, as she had done for her mother, and plaited her hair tightly, winding it round her head like a coronet.

Charlotte, coming into the bedroom, said : "Claudia,

couldn't you let me do your hair a little more—well, loosely? That new style of hairdressing has such a softening effect."

"To counteract my weather-beaten appearance?" Claudia asked. "No, I like to feel that my hair is safe, that it won't come falling down at the end of half an hour."

The drive was cold. Charlotte shivered; and Claudia decided that she herself would arrive at Seston with a scarlet nose to make her less attractive than she felt already. Why did people want to drag you five miles, when you had plenty of books and blazing fires at home? Seston Hall shone through the night, lights in every window. The hall was warm, the scent of flowers filled the air, and old James Bower welcomed Claudia with the assurance that she was the best-looking girl he'd seen all the evening.

"The evening's only just begun!" she challenged him.

"All the girls are here, though," he assured her. "You're late, Claudia. Edward's been looking for you. There, go and enjoy yourself, I'll look after your mother."

She danced with the young men she knew: with Edgar Kennedy, who trod on her feet and apologized twenty times in a single dance, with Edward Bower, who said that he was glad she had come, and that she was the best dancer in the room; with George Veysey, who stuttered and wanted to stop every time he tried to speak, because he said that if he tried to talk and dance at the same time his stammer became unmanageable. Every time young men took Claudia back to where her mother sat, Charlotte smiled and said: "Are you enjoying yourself, darling?"

"Very much indeed, mama," Claudia assured her, finding her anxiety almost pathetic, and trying hard to conceal the fact that she was terribly bored.

"Who is the girl over there in pale blue?" Francis Coster asked Edward Bower. "The girl with red hair?"

"Her hair isn't red," Edward replied, "it's reddish-gold. Her name is Claudia Marsden."

"Introduce me."

"I thought you stipulated that you were not to be introduced to any woman under thirty because girls bored you?"

"Consistency is the virtue of fools, my dear Edward,"

Coster said. "That girl's a beauty, and I suppose she knows it, eh?"

"She'd have to be more than an average fool if she didn't know it," Edward returned sharply, "—and believe me, she's not that."

He disliked Francis Coster, who was the son of old Ferdinand Coster, the big wine merchant. Francis had come north to inspect various machines connected with bottling, corking, and other matters of interest to the trade which his father followed so successfully.

"Not that he knows anything about it," Edward grumbled to Sir James. "If ever there was a damned fool, it's Francis Coster."

"Old Jimmy" agreed. "Looks more like a good-looking gal to me, not a man at all. That curled yellow hair, that damn' silly little moustache, and his clothes! In my days we'd have called him a 'masher'. Still, his father's brass is as good as other folks', Edward. Mind that!"

Now Edward watched Francis with actual dislike. The fellow was too good-looking, his clothes were too admirable. Fancy getting himself up in one of the new-fangled white waistcoats and a gardenia, for a little dance in the country! Pearl studs in his shirt, and more pearls in his links. Looked like a walking jeweller's shop. As he watched Coster's eyes following Claudia, Edward Bower experienced a sudden sense of misgiving. Was he going to fall in love with her? If he did, would Claudia like him?

This heavy young man, old for his years, hard-working and clever, but possessing no lightness of touch, was fully conscious of his own shortcomings. He knew that his conversation was dull, that his ideas, though sound enough, were not particularly interesting. He knew that he was making money, that he would inherit a considerable fortune when his father died. He would be the second baronet, master of Seston. He stood beside Francis Coster, looking rather like a dray-horse placed next to a well-bred racer. He was not ugly, he was merely heavily built and ordinary. His face was not unhandsome, but it lacked all lightness. His pale-blue eyes protruded a little, the whites were tinged with yellow.

His large moustache entirely covered his mouth, which was his only good feature.

Francis Coster, half a head taller than his host, lounged gracefully while Edward stood stiffly upright. Coster's clothes were beautifully cut, while Edward's looked thick and clumsy.

"You might introduce me. Even if I don't dance, I might find her amusing. I might even try one dance—though it's frightfully fatiguing."

It was one of the fashionable affectations of young men of Coster's type to pretend that dancing both bored and wearied them. A year ago, when it had been "the thing" to enjoy dancing, he had danced all night; now he leant against the door-post and protested that he wasn't a "dancing man".

He told Edward later that talking to Claudia Marsden was like sitting in a room with all the windows open, but her outspoken conversation acted like a tonic on his rather jaded palate. As a rule young women made much of him, and it was something of a novelty to meet one who expressed no particular pleasure or excitement when he hinted that he would like to meet her again. She asked no questions as to where they would meet, never even asked how long he was staying in Yorkshire, only nodded and said: "Would you? Well, we might run into each other. Marbury isn't exactly as large as London, and Marlingly's even smaller."

A few days later Francis met her as he walked over the fields, muffled in a huge ulster, wondering if any other place in all the world could be quite so bleak and boring as Yorkshire. He saw her coming, and was astonished to find how pleased he was to see her again. Her beauty was so appealing, her eyes so bright, and he liked the way in which she swung along, moving, it seemed, without effort, as if all her muscles worked in perfect harmony.

"This is lucky!" he cried. "I was just wondering whether I should send a telegram to myself ordering me to return to London. May I walk with you?"

"If you care to, and if you can walk fast. I hate loitering."

"Even if you're with someone you like very much?"

"I don't see why that should make me enjoy loitering."

"I believe that it's supposed to matter a good deal." She was not encouraging. He changed the subject. "Is that your dog? What breed is it?"

"*She*," Claudia said with emphasis, "is a mongrel. There's greyhound in her somewhere—her mother was almost pure. Her father—well"—her eyes wrinkled at the corners, Francis noticed, as she smiled—"I have never tried to guess what her father was."

"Which seems to throw some doubt on the purity of her mother, eh?"

This time she didn't smile, and he mentally shrugged his shoulders, reflecting that she was a bit of a prude.

When they reached the gates of Marlingly, he hesitated, hoping that she would ask him to come in with her. She noticed the half-expectant expression, and thought: 'Oh, bother it! I suppose that the man wants tea and I must ask him to come in.'

"If you'd care to come in and have a cup of tea—" she began.

"I should love it," Francis said promptly.

"It won't be like Sir James's Orange Pekoe," Claudia warned him.

"There are other things far more valuable to me than Orange Pekoe. Didn't it occur to you that I might want to spend more time with you?"

"I don't see why you should. I've not been particularly interesting."

"You're particularly beautiful, Miss Claudia."

She stared at him. Could this good-looking young man be making fun of her, or was this how Londoners talked after meeting you twice? If they did, Claudia decided, they were even sillier than she had imagined.

Francis liked the shabby old house; the old-fashioned furniture pleased him, and once or twice his eyes lit on some bit of china, an old chair, even a good water-colour with real delight. His love of beauty was undeniable, and his appreciation was very keen. His own rooms in St. James's were furnished in admirable taste, and it was a source of real distress that his parents' huge, luxurious house in Portland Square

should be filled with hideous furniture to which they clung with tenacity, in spite of all his protests.

His quick eyes noticed the shabby carpet, noticed too that there were patches on the wall-paper where the original hue was still unfaded. 'Pictures taken down recently,' he decided. 'Probably sold. They're evidently hard-up. The girl looks lovely, she did at Seston, but her clothes aren't this year's—or last year's either. Poor as church mice !'

He was charming to Charlotte, telling her of the latest plays, of London, and the Royal Family, in a way which won her heart. Even Claudia found his quiet, well-modulated voice distinctly pleasant, and more than once knew that she was actually enjoying his company.

They met again. Francis rode over, bringing books which he begged Claudia to read because he wished for her opinion of them. He sent boxes of flowers ordered from London, obtained new music which he played delightfully. In short, he managed to spend a good deal of his time with Claudia Marsden.

"He's very attentive," Charlotte said. "Do you think, Claudio, that perhaps he is more than just—interested in your opinion of books?"

Conscious that her face flushed suddenly, Claudia said : "Mama, how do I know ? I think I amuse him, though I don't know why. He likes me—I like him when he forgets to be bored and too exquisite and is natural."

"I'm outstaying my welcome," Francis said to Edward, when he had already been at Seston for a fortnight. "You'll be asking me to go very soon, and I shan't blame you."

"I never believed that the country could have held you for so long," Edward replied heavily. "I thought that your world was bounded by the West End of London."

"So did I !" Francis laughed. "You realize what has happened, of course."

Edward's stolid face assumed a shade of ugly brick-red, his eyes seemed to protrude a little more than usual. "I dunno—I couldn't say," he stammered ; while in his heart he cried : 'It can't be true ! He can't be going to tell me that it's—Claudia !'

"Only one thing—except your company, of course, Edward—could have kept me in the wilds. Love! I never thought to find it here, by Jove!"

Edward licked his lips. "It's—a girl?"

"The girl—the only girl," Francis corrected.

"Claudia Marsden, eh?"

"Who else could it be?"

"No, of course—I mean, yes. I wish you luck. She's a splendid girl."

"Thanks, old man. Well, I must get along. Picture me shivering in a damp field, waiting for the girl of my dreams."

Edward went back to his drawings and tried to concentrate upon a new type of harrow which should do twice as much work twice as efficiently as any previous types. He wiped his forehead with a red-and-yellow silk bandana handkerchief, and once slipped his fingers inside the edge of his collar as if it were too tight for him. Silently he cursed himself for a fool. He had been so absorbed in his work, so certain that she was still a child, so dominated by his determination to make a success of his work, that he had forgotten how Claudia might appeal to other men. While he had waited, worked, and allowed nothing more substantial than dreams to fill his heart, he had lost her.

With a sigh he turned back to his designs. "It's my own silly fault. I've been a damned, unobservant fool."

Meanwhile, Francis walked over the sad-coloured winter fields. He glanced up at the low grey sky, let his eyes wander over the grey fields, the grey walls; even the moors seemed to him to be the very essence of melancholy. Slate-grey skies, green-grey fields, steel-grey rivers, brownish-grey walls—even the people were grey, all of them except Claudia, and she emerged brilliant, warm and vital.

Then in the distance he saw her, with Vanity circling round her. His heart beat faster and his lips parted with pleasure at the sight of her beautifully balanced figure with its crown of red-gold hair.

"I thought that you were never coming!" he cried.

"I'm sorry—mama wanted me to do something for her."

As she spoke, Claudia realized two things: one that she was

tacitly admitting she was sorry for keeping this young man waiting five minutes, the other that she was happy because he had waited so eagerly and had feared that she might not come.

"Nothing matters now that you are here," he said, and taking her hand in his, lifted it to his lips. "Oh, Claudia, how lovely you are!" Then, drawing her closer, he went on, speaking very rapidly: "You do understand, don't you? You know that I love you, that I can't do without you. I want to take you away from this greyness and coldness. I want to make you laugh, and make you happy. Claudia, tell me that you love me—and then say that you will marry me."

She drew back and stood watching him, her generous mouth very tender.

"I think that I must love you," she said, "because it makes me so happy to hear you say those things. It's difficult for me—I've never fallen in love before, never even imagined that I was in love."

"Never—really never?" The thought delighted him. He had been right: she was quite unspoilt, completely innocent.

"Never!" She laughed. "You see, there have always been so many other things to do, and none of the men I met were—in the least like you. If they had been, who knows what might have happened?"

"There is no one like me," Francis boasted; "and there is no one like you. We're unique. That's why we waited for each other, although we didn't know it."

"Did you wait?" Claudia asked, her eyes dancing with amusement. However much she might love him, whenever he became too high-falutin she wanted to laugh. Rubbish was rubbish no matter how much you might love the person who gave voice to it. "Did you really wait?"

Francis did not answer for a moment. He had not the slightest intention of telling her about the tall, fair-haired girl—a member of the chorus at the Galaxy Theatre—who at that moment was occupying rooms in St. John's Wood for which he paid the rent. It would have been both brutal and idiotic to enumerate the various ladies in London and Paris who had smiled upon him, allowed him in lesser or greater degrees to finance them.

"Darling," he said, his face serious and, to Claudia, ridiculously and beautifully young, "can you forgive me for all the stupidities which have happened since I left Oxford? I can only tell you this—that now, here, I have a right to ask you to marry me."

Immediately she felt that she had been ungenerous. Probably he had sown his wild oats—all young men did—and she had not read *Tom Jones* and *Harry Lorrequer* for nothing. He was free now, that was all she had any right to know.

"Forgive you!" she said impulsively. "How can you ask me to forgive you for something which happened years ago, before you even knew that such a person as Claudia Marsden existed? I have no right to blame you, even to ask you about anything which happened before this afternoon."

His face shone with pleasure. She was not going to be intrusive, not going to ask difficult questions, not going to be tedious. Of course he would put an end to everything with Aline; he would write and tell her that he was going to be married, pay up and look pleasant, but make it quite clear that life in future was going to be a more serious business.

He caught Claudia's hands and drew her to him. Their lips met, and Claudia felt that a wave of emotion caught her and swept her off her feet. Nothing mattered. Time stood still. The grey skies disappeared and she felt that she stood in bright sunshine. The world was empty but for Francis and herself. Very gently she pushed him away and stared at him, her beautiful eyes full of tears.

"My dearest Claudia, what is wrong?" he cried.

She laughed, a little shaken. "Nothing; only I understand now. I know now how much I love you. I didn't before."

Francis was impatient. He had never wanted anything in his life which had not been procured for him instantly. He wanted Claudia Marsden very much indeed, and determined that she should marry him as quickly as possible. He interviewed her father that evening in the stuffy library, and realized that he was talking to a man who had blunted his brains with too much alcohol. Thomas talked a good deal, saying very little that was of importance. He mumbled about settlements,

and Francis countered with the information that his father and mother were wealthy and had never denied him anything in his life.

"Once let me talk to my father," he assured Thomas, "and I shall be able to arrange marvellous settlements for Claudia."

Thomas blinked, nodded a trifle unsteadily, and said : "That's right. You must look af'er Claudia. The pick o' the bunch, the apple of my eye. It will break m' heart to see her go away."

His engagement seemed to have inspired Francis with new energy. He applied for a special licence, he rushed up to Town, came back loaded with gifts for Claudia, and within three weeks they were married.

"Honeymoon ?" he queried in answer to her demands. "Why, sweetest, the whole of our lives will be one long honeymoon. First Paris, then—well, the whole world's open to us."

"Won't you stop in London to see your father and mother ?"

He frowned. "See my father and mother ? Good lord, no ! Anyway, they aren't in Town, they're at the villa near Menton. No, I won't face the villa. Horrible place, all turrets and balconies. Paris is the only place for people who are in love."

His father and mother sent a long telegram, the longest that Claudia had ever seen. She had never imagined that people sent telegrams like letters—things which covered sheet after sheet, and which must have cost a great deal. They seemed to be very happy over the wedding ; they filled the telegram with blessings and expressions of goodwill, and profuse apologies that they could not face the long journey in the middle of winter. The telegram ended with words which she could not understand and which Francis, after scowling at them for a few seconds, said were Spanish.

"You see, angel," he said, "we're really Spaniards. My father was born Ferdinand Costa, and changed his name when he came to England. Don't think that we're aristocrats !" He threw back his handsome head and laughed. "Nothing of the kind. Wine merchants, that's all. Oh, we may have a villa in the South of France and a huge and hideous house in

Portland Square—that proves nothing except that my clever old father has made money."

Claudia nodded, her hands clasped round her knees, her eyes gazing into the heart of the leaping fire. "I see. But, Francis, tell me—what do you do—work at? You do something, don't you?"

"Well, this is the way of it. The wine business is a long, complicated affair. One learns slowly, picks up things as one goes along. My father didn't want me to rush into the business, he preferred that I should go slowly—visit the châteaux, visit the wine exporters, the vineyards, and so learn everything—right back to the training of the vines. That's why I want to go to France, so that I can be getting on with my studies, as it were."

She nodded, replied that she quite understood—for at that time Claudia would have tried to understand anything that Francis had told her. He was her world ; she scarcely thought of anyone except Francis Coster during those days which preceded her wedding. He was charming, he was a kind of fairy prince, almost a demi-god. He said all the things that she hoped he might say, declared that her father was a "splendid type", that her mother was "the perfect English gentlewoman". He laughed with Robert, called him a fine fellow, and tipped him generously. He duly admired Harriet, even going so far as to whisper to Claudia that he thought it was a shame she should be about to have a child. He treated Broom with cold condescension, and told Claudia that he believed him "a rank sensualist masquerading as a priest". He sang pleasantly, he played remarkably well, he was versed in modern literature and poetry, and there were times—when he whispered verses to her—that Claudia felt the world could not hold anywhere such music as his voice.

They were married on the last day of November, when the wind screamed in the tree-tops and the snow swirled along the roads in little flurries. The small church was almost empty as Claudia walked up the aisle on her father's arm. She thought how his clothes smelt of moth-balls and how she wished that he had not taken that last brandy-and-soda to give him what he called, "Dutch courage, because I'm losing my flower of

the flock". Her mother cried softly into a lace-edged hand-kerchief, and Robert stood stiffly beside her, trying in his rather clumsy fashion to comfort her. As Claudia passed she heard his boyishly gruff whisper: "Cheer up, mama. There she is! It's going to be all right."

She saw Francis—very tall, very slim and elegant—and beside him Edward Bower. The thought came to her that Edward had lost all his colour, that he looked white, and that his mouth was shut into unaccustomed lines. Then the Rector began the service and the rest was a blur. She heard detached words, she heard her own voice saying: "I, Claudia Mary, take thee, Francis Ezra . . ." And then: ". . . so long as you both shall live." She thought that if either of them died that meant the other could marry again without the one who was dead feeling hurt, then knew that if Francis died she would not want to live at all—certainly never live to marry anyone else.

They crowded into the vestry, where she signed her name and Francis kissed her and whispered, "Oh, my dear—my very dear!"

Robert said, "I say, Claudio, can I sign it too?" And she said that of course he could; and he did, making a huge blot on the page and getting terribly red about the ears. She thought for the first time that she was leaving Robert, and turning, caught him to her and kissed him. It was rather horrible to leave Robert; vaguely she wondered if Francis would allow him to come with them. Robert wriggled under the embrace and said: "Cheer up, Claudio; it's all right"—exactly as he had spoken to mama in the church.

They were back in the house, and seated at the big dining-table with all the leaves in it to make it large enough to seat them all. There was papa, looking yellow and tired; mama smiling and wiping her eyes from time to time; Robert pointing to various dishes and saying, "Claudie made that—she's a first-rate cook—when she likes."

Had she really made those pies and cooked those chickens and prepared sweets? That was when she was Claudia Marsden; now she was Claudia Coster, a different person. Those fingers which touched hers under the cover of the damask

table-cloth belonged to her husband, Francis Coster. She smiled down the table to Edward ; to old red-faced Sir James, who lifted his glass and shouted, "Here's to our Claudia, the finest lass in the three Ridings !" ; the Rector and Edgar ; apoplectic Veysey and his thin, depressed-looking wife ; foxy-faced Thorpe and his two tall, thin daughters ; Wilson of Hartburn, who looked like a respectable butler and was said to gamble more recklessly than any other man in the district.

Then at last her eyes turned to Francis, who, rather flushed, was laughing and chattering. How handsome he was, how well and easily he talked. Instinctively he seemed to know exactly what to say to everyone, how to amuse and interest. She found it difficult to believe that this brilliant creature was her husband, that this magnificent young man had married Claudia Marsden, who possessed only one evening-dress, and whose clothes were all turned and re-turned, whose shoes were soled again and again, and whose gloves nearly always wanted mending at the finger-tips.

Francis turned to her, smiling, his eyes alight. "Almost time we were off, Claudia," he whispered. "How marvellous to think that we, you and I, are going off together, eh ?"

Everyone crowded into the hall wishing them good-bye and good luck. Robert ran down the steps to tie an old white satin slipper on to the back axle of the carriage which James Bower had lent them to drive into Marbury, where they would pick up the London train. Her father slipped a couple of five-pound notes into her jacket pocket, saying as he kissed her : "Good-bye, my lass—I shall miss you damnable !" Her mother flung her arms round her, and with tears streaming down her cheeks besought Francis to "be good to my little girl". Then, on the arm of her husband, she ran down to the carriage, only pausing to catch Robert to her, whispering : "Robbie dear, work hard. You'll like working for Edward, won't you ? Oh, darling, I wish that I could take you with me."

The door closed ; she caught a last glimpse of Edward Bower's face, twisted into something approaching a smile, and together she and Francis drove away.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY stayed in London for one night, then crossed to France and went on to Paris. Francis painted pictures of Paris for her, using phrases which alternately amused and shocked her a little. His method of expression was always inclined to be extravagant, but when he spoke of Paris it became almost fantastic. Claudia listened tolerantly, as she might have listened to a child describing the beauties of a Christmas pantomime.

She had believed that the London hotel where they stayed was the last word in luxury and comfort, but the hotel in Paris amazed her. She stared at the long windows hung with light apple-green silk curtains, at the walls with their silk panels, at the satin coverlet on the bed, and at the bath-room which appeared to her to be almost indecent in its size and modernity.

“Do you know that I’ve never had a bath except in one which was painted to look like marble and enclosed in a kind of mahogany box ?”

He laughed, pinched her cheek, and told her that she would learn lots of things in Paris and that after a week she’d wonder why the English ever tolerated their horrible bath-rooms.

Marriage puzzled her considerably. No young woman who has lived all her life in the country can be altogether ignorant of matters concerning sex and reproduction, for there is very little reticence in nature, and none in the farmyard. Claudia was no exception ; still, marriage disturbed her a little. She had believed that however tempestuous love-making might be, the surge of passion was followed by a period of deep tenderness, consideration, perhaps even a strange kind of regret. Francis Coster disillusioned her. He was impatient of her reserve ; he appeared not to wish only to make love to her, but to indulge in a wild orgy of passion which once over left him entirely cold, and desirous of nothing

but sleep. His demands made her self-conscious, and when he spoke to her sharply, or made game of her scruples, she felt degraded and unhappy. Because she was very much in love with him, she blamed herself and tried to subdue all her instinctive dislike of what seemed to her to be a distortion of something lovely and natural. She blamed herself for criticizing him and did her best to believe that she was limited and even a little narrow. But the doubts persisted, and try as she would she could not erase his easy mockery, his contemptuous laughter, and his rather cruel jokes at her expense, from her mind. They remained like a dirty mark on the surface of her love for him, a mark which, try as she would, she could not wipe away.

They never rested. Claudia had been accustomed to a considerable amount of solitude, to long periods of quiet when she could read or pursue her own thoughts ; she had always taken a great deal of exercise, and this new life in Paris wearied her terribly. True, she had her own enormous bedroom and Francis had his dressing-room, but whenever she tried to sit down to write letters or to read, he would burst into the room declaring that it was unheard of to sit reading books when one was spending a honeymoon in Paris. They went nowhere on foot and Claudia, longing for exercise, conscious that her muscles were growing slack, and that she felt stupid from lack of air, grew to dread the sight of Francis's lifted stick and his cry of "*Cocher !*" as he hailed a cab.

He rushed her from one dressmaker to another, spending money recklessly : she had never believed that one person could possess or need so many hats, dresses, boots, shoes, and gloves. It was impossible for Francis to walk half a dozen yards without diving into some shop, dragging her with him, where he bought her some new addition to her wardrobe. Her days were spent in dressing and undressing, changing her clothes, sitting before her glass while a hairdresser arranged her hair in some new style which Francis believed would suit her.

He appeared to know everyone, and Claudia grew used to visiting people whose language she could not speak, whose conversation was unintelligible to her.

"You couldn't leave me at home, could you ?" she asked Francis when he proposed to carry her off to visit some old friends of his who had just returned from America. "You see, I don't speak French."

"Nonsense, my darling ; of course you speak French ! You lack confidence, that's all. Try talking French to me. Come on ! Now say, 'Good morning, my dear Francis'—that's easy."

She frowned, trying hard to remember what Miss Baxter had taught her in the old school-room at Marlingly, pinching her lips together in her intense concentration. "*Bong swar—no, nwee—mong cher—*" She stopped because he flung back his head and shouted with laughter.

"Great heavens ! It's not possible ! Again, Claudia—again ! Encore—encore !"

She said gravely, "Wasn't it right ?"

He sprang to his feet and pulled her to him. "Angel, it was perfect, but it was emphatically not French. How is it that you girls have governesses, spend hours in the school-room, and emerge talking like that ?"

"I don't know. Only, d'you suppose that the average French girl who lives in the country speaks English any better than I try to speak French ? I don't !"

"You're angry—indignant—my lovely, insular Claudia ! I adore you when you look angry, it suits you. Never mind, I shall teach you to speak wonderful French. You shall learn it in the only possible way. The only place to learn any language properly is—guess where."

She smiled, her instant's annoyance gone. "I don't know—with my husband, perhaps."

"Not of necessity—though in this case certainly advisable. On the pillow, my angel."

For a week he would lie in bed, teaching her to string sentences together, teaching her patiently, though he laughed at her mistakes. She was quick and intelligent, and certainly made considerable progress, but he tired quickly, and when she asked : "Francis, tell me how to say, 'I don't like coffee for breakfast, please send up some tea,'" he yawned, assuring her that in the first place, even if he told her what to say, no one

would understand her, and that in the second place, only fools asked for tea in Paris unless they wanted to ticket themselves British.

So Claudia continued to accompany her husband to entertainments given by his friends, where she scarcely spoke, and where she understood not one word of the conversation. The women stared at her, and the men eyed her with a certain furtive admiration.

"I wish that the men wouldn't stare so," Claudia complained. "They make me feel that they're undressing me with their eyes."

"My dearest child, the women are jealous of you, the men of me," Francis told her. Then, slipping his arm round her: "They'd give a good deal—every man jack of them—for favours from you, my lovely Claudia. There, don't blush; you must know by this time what men dream of when they look at women as young, as attractive, as you are. Don't develop into a prude, my dear. I loathe prudes."

When March was slipping into April he announced that they were going south. She asked if they were to visit his father and mother.

"My father and mother! Good lord, no! I shouldn't go south until I knew that they were safely back in the family home in Town. Thank you, I don't care to waste time in the bosom of my family."

"It seems so queer to think that I've never seen them."

"You'll see them soon enough. You and I might as well enjoy ourselves while we can. The old man is certain to get restive soon, and write long screeds complaining that I'm learning nothing about the business. Then we shall have to make a long, boring tour of the châteaux, and I shall have to pretend to be studying how to make wine, and bottle it, and all the other objectionable details connected with an objectionable trade. Ugh! Let's forget it."

The South of France meant nothing more to Claudia than Paris transferred to the sea coast. They lived the same life, they lived in an hotel which was the counterpart of the one which they had left, ate the same food, met almost exactly the same people; she heard the same high laughter, met the same

glances, listened to the same music. The cafés were ~~rather~~ more lively, the restaurants more brightly painted ; otherwise life was unchanged.

Francis gambled a good deal, and returned home either wildly elated or furiously angry. He either petted, spoilt, and made love to her, or scowled at her, sneering at everything she said. Slowly he began to allow her to remain at home when he visited his friends. She spent hours writing long letters home, begging Robert to work hard ; to her mother hoping that things were going smoothly at home ; trying to interest her father in long accounts of what she had seen, and sympathizing with Harriet on the death of her little son, who had lived only for six weeks.

In the early days of May they returned to Paris, and Claudia found that she was going to have a child. She told Francis, expecting that he would be delighted at the prospect. Instead, he frowned, declared that it was most unfortunate and that it would restrict their movements, their amusements, terribly. Paris was very hot in May ; the pavements seemed to burn Claudia's feet through her thin, elegant shoes. Her elaborate clothes were a positive discomfort, and she felt that she would have given everything she possessed for a breath of the moors, for the quiet stillness of the walled garden at Marlingly, or for the murmur of the little river as it slipped over the stones, tinged with the brown of the peat through which it had come.

Then one morning Francis, clothed in a magnificent dressing-gown, a cigar in his fingers, Turkish slippers on his feet, entered her room announcing that his father had written to him.

“Just what I expected ! I am not working—I ought to be ! I am not earning any money, I am spending it instead ! I must either begin to work or return immediately to London. Confound it, just as I was enjoying myself ! How like my father !”

Claudia, sitting up in bed, her hands clasped round her knees, her hair hanging in two long plaits over her shoulders, knew that her heart beat more rapidly. London ! They would go back, she would be able to slip up to Yorkshire to see Robert, her father and mother, and Harrie. She would walk

over the fields with Vanity, and listen to the greeting of the country-folk she knew and loved.

"Then shall we go back to London?" she asked, trying hard to keep the eagerness from showing too plainly in her voice.

"London! To live in Portland Square with my father and mother! Are you mad, Claudia? No, I'll tell him that I'll make a tour of the vineyards and see what kind of a crop they may expect. Oh, I'll pull wool over his eyes, never fear! It might even be rather amusing."

She found the French country strange and even slightly ridiculous. The flat lands were dull and uninspiring, the châteaux fantastic and theatrical, and the vineyards less interesting than the meadows and orchards of Yorkshire. The long, straight roads bored her—they appeared to stretch away to infinity—and even the much-vaunted cooking was, she felt, overrated. They stayed at comfortable inns, or in large houses which belonged to growers who were friends of Francis Coster's father. He was made much of, treated as an honoured guest, and his good looks were praised so openly that Claudia blushed for him.

It was during this tour that she began to suspect Francis drank more than was good for him. Again and again she retired to bed, leaving him talking and drinking with his friends, and frequently she had fallen asleep when he came up to their room. Claudia slept soundly, her healthy young body needed its proper amount of rest, while Francis appeared to require little or no sleep. He loved to sit laughing and talking until the small hours and then lie in bed the next morning until nearly midday.

She noticed his heavy eyes, his disinclination for food, and his irritability. His former devotion to her had died, and he now alternated between sudden storms of ill-temper and equally sudden gusts of passion. She still retained her physical attraction for him, and Claudia, whose knowledge as to what was right or wise during pregnancy was of the slightest, spent many hours worrying over what was best for her child, while she blamed herself for being cold to her husband.

The knowledge that she was losing his love came to her slowly. She attributed the change in him at first to the fact

that she was less attractive in her present condition. She even tried to persuade herself that his irritability arose from a certain anxiety concerning her, and that he spent those long hours every evening away from her in order that she might get sufficient rest and sleep.

She was, however, too intelligent not to revise her opinions fairly quickly. The realization that Francis was losing his love for her came as a shock which almost stunned her. She had given him everything ; she had allowed him to transplant her from her own country to another for no reason except that he preferred it, and she wished to please him. She had left her mother, father, and dearly loved brother for him. She had tried to subdue her natural inclinations, to overlook many things which displeased her. Now to know that he was surely and certainly changing in his feeling for her almost broke her heart.

The first night, when she woke with a start to find Francis staggering about the room, cursing under his breath, belching loudly, and finally seating himself on the floor so that he might remove his boots without falling over, she sat up in bed, her face white with horror and disgust. Thomas Marsden had always drunk sufficiently, of later years considerably more than was good for him, but none of his children had ever seen him incapable of either speech or controlled movement.

Francis, struggling with his boot, slipped sideways and began to giggle helplessly. Then, seeing Claudia watching him, said :

“Damn’ silly ! Can’t gerrr boo’ off ! Claurrier—my sweetest—come an’ help me gerrr damn’ boot off, wi’ you ?”

She climbed out of the high, country bed and, feeling half frozen with disgust, seized the boot and dragged it off, shivering as she caught the reek of stale spirit on his breath. The sight of this semi-idiotic, glassy-eyed, mouthing creature who stank abominably, whose loose mouth hung open, while little streaks of saliva trickled from the corners of his lips, sickened her. She went back to bed and lay there stiffly on the extreme edge, trying to overcome that sense of nausea which swept over her when she remembered that Francis would come and share that bed with her.

He stumbled to the bed and, still muttering, climbed into it, stretching out his arm and laying his hand on her shoulder.

"Claurrier—w're are you? Don' go so farrerway. Kiss me goo' ni'. Come on, be a good gir'!"

"If you touch me," she said distinctly, speaking sufficiently slowly for the words to pierce the mists of alcohol, "I think that I shall kill myself—or you."

He drew his hand away. "Hell! Goin' t' give me t' old prudish stuff, eh? Keep y' kisses. I don' want 'em!"

The next morning he was half penitent, half swaggering in his attitude. He laughed at her, told her that all men got drunk sometimes, and were no worse for it. He was sorry if he had annoyed her, but she must learn not to make mountains out of molehills. These things were only incidents, to be forgotten, even laughed about in retrospect.

He stood beside her at the open window, his arm round her, and kissed her cheek. "My lovely Claudia, don't be huffy. Kiss and be friends. I'll be the best of good boys in future. There, I swear it!"

"I hate it so, Francis. I hate it not only for myself but for you. It's as if you were someone different, someone I scarcely know."

"Does that mean that when I am myself—you love me? It does—of course it does. I'll never risk again being someone you don't like. I couldn't bear it. Now we're friends again, and lovers—eh, Claudia—lovers always, aren't we?"

However, he did risk it again, risked it indeed so often that when they were back in Paris Claudia grew used to hearing him staggering about his dressing-room, swearing at his boots, his tie, and his stiffly starched shirt.

She was alone a good deal, for Francis explained his reasons for not taking her about with him in a manner which shocked her by its frankness.

"Even if I took you to a box at the opera, Claudia, people would notice. There's something just a little revolting in a pregnant woman, don't you think? Particularly a pretty woman in that state. Makes people feel uncomfortable, y'know. I don't quite know where you're going to have this

child ; can't have it in an hotel. I shall have to find a nursing-home. What a bore it all is!"

Then her old anger flared, and she stormed at him as she had stormed at people who displeased her in the old days when she had been Claudia Marsden.

"How dare you?" she demanded. "How dare you talk so to me? Isn't it your child? Don't you accept any responsibility? Have I to shoulder everything alone? In Paris! I tell you I won't have my baby in Paris. I hate Paris, I hate the people. How could I face it with doctors I can't understand and who can't understand me? I tell you I can't breathe in this furnace of a town. I want air! I shall go back to my own people and let the baby be born in a place where it won't have its lungs ruined with smells and smoke, and its life made miserable in this infernal heat."

Francis stared at her, hands in his pockets, swinging backwards and forwards on his heels. She looked damned handsome when she lost her temper.

"By Gad," he said, "Henri Perron was right when he said the other day that you were the most handsome woman in Paris!"

"Let Henri Perron keep his opinions to himself," Claudia flung back. "I tell you I won't stay in Paris. I'm going—you can please yourself."

"All right, all right. Only for heaven's sake don't talk about going up to Yorkshire. I couldn't face it, and if I didn't hang round you I suppose that I should be called callous and unfeeling. We'll go back to London; only I warn you—you won't like Portland Square."

"I shall like it better than Paris."

"Very well, I'll write tonight. Only remember, I told you . . ."

"Told me—what? What's the matter, Francis? What's wrong with your father's house, since we haven't a house of our own?"

"Look here, Claudia," Francis said abruptly. "I've never really got on with my parents. I'm not a bit like them. They live queer, quiet lives, have all kinds of queer ideas and manners."

She frowned. "Is there anything wrong with them?" she asked. "You're not trying to tell me that they're lunatics or something, are you? They don't drink, do they? Speak out, Francis."

She saw his good-looking, dissipated face change colour, saw the blood rise under his fair skin, and noticed how he twisted his mouth trying to find the words with which to answer her.

"They're—oh, damn it!—you might as well hear. They're Jews. My mother wears a horsehair wig, and my father sticks a skull cap on his head the moment he enters the house! There, you've got it!"

"But—good heavens, why should that matter? Then you're a Jew too?"

"My God, I'm not!" His face was furious again. "Don't you ever say that to me, d'you hear? I hate Jews, loathe them, detest their damned money-grubbing ways, their nasty, lisping speech, their belief that all members of a family should love one another and sit in one another's pockets. I never wanted you to meet them, to know them at all. I never tell anyone, never take anyone to the house, never live there myself if I can help it."

"Only accept money on which to live from your father, and make use of him whenever you want anything, eh?" She spoke coldly, then her disgust overcame her. "Don't tell me any more. I don't want to hear. I'm ashamed of you. To apologize for your own father and mother! I will write to them myself. I ought to have written months ago."

"Then, damn it, write!" Francis shouted. "Write, and have the pair of them sentimentalizing over you—and the baby."

"I will. It will be a distinct change to have someone sentimentalize over me—or the baby."

That night Francis did not come home. Claudia, waking in the small hours, went into the bath-room for water, and seeing his dressing-room door was open, went to close it. The bed was empty.

In the morning she heard him splashing about in the bath-room, and presently he entered her bedroom. He was anxious to be friendly, said that he was sorry to have lost his

temper the night before, even tried to explain that a dislike of the Jewish race was something quite inexplicable, and far too strong to fight against. "Something like the way some people hate niggers or cats, y'know, Claudia."

"Where were you last night?" she said coolly.

"Me? Where was I? Where should I be?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. I looked into your dressing-room about half past three; you weren't there. I wondered where you had been. Don't bother to manufacture a lie, Francis."

He was immediately indignant. "Manufacture a lie! I like that! Why should I? I went home with Rodier—he had a party at his flat, and I stayed there because it was late and I didn't want to disturb you. Did you think I'd been with some woman, eh?"

"Quite honestly, that never occurred to me until you put it into my head."

"Small blame to me if I had been! You're not very amusing these days, are you?" In a tone of self-pity he continued: "You used to be so different. I used to think that you were the most vital creature I'd ever met. You were always ready to go anywhere and do anything."

"Probably. One hasn't a great surplus of vitality when one is seven months pregnant. Oh, I wrote to your father last night."

Francis groaned. "God help us. London in August! Family life!"

Ferdinand Coster replied and, for the first time for months, Claudia lost her self-control when she read the letter. She had scarcely admitted to herself how she had suffered at the thought that she might be forced to face her confinement in Paris, how she had resented the loneliness, the long, dreary hours which she had spent trying to find some way to pass the time when Francis was out. No one knew how often she had lain awake, her hands clenched, trying to subdue her wild imaginings, trying to forget that she might have to enter a nursing-home where doctors and nurses all spoke this language which she could never understand.

She held the long, rather elaborately expressed letter in

her hand, and cried for a long time after she read it. The tears fell, blotting the slanting, fine script which was so difficult to read, while Claudia Coster sobbed quietly with relief and sheer gratitude to this old man she had never met.

Drying her eyes, she turned back to the letter and let the warmth and kindness of its phrases soothe and tranquillize her again.

Our beloved daughter . . . this greatest of all great news comes from you and is gathered into our hearts . . . already your dear mother plans how best we may make you happy and comfortable in our home, which is yours. Remember that you come as a dear daughter, long looked for, long expected. . . . Will you trouble yourself to send for my agent in Paris, Isidore Pinto, who is also my dear and trusted friend? His address is 162, Rue des Italiennes. It is our pride and privilege to beg that he may be allowed to be a banker for you, and supply you with all that you may need or want. . . . May I beg one favour of you? There is, in the Rue de Rivoli, a shop which sells marrons glacés of which my dear wife is very fond. Would it be possible to bring over a large box of them for her delectation? . . . I write with a full heart. We are waiting for you. Allow me to subscribe myself your loving and expectant father,

Ferdinand Coster.

Not a word of Francis, not a word saying that they longed to see him. Claudia decided not to show him the letter. When he came in she hoped that he would not notice her inflamed eyes. He was in one of his bad moods, sulky, obviously having drunk too much, and inclined to be offensive.

“I have heard from your father,” Claudia said.

“Oh!” He shot a glance in her direction. “Been crying over it? How amusing! I told you that he’d be sentimental.”

“He was very kind,” she said. “He is looking forward to seeing us.”

“Did he send any money?”

“No.” She hesitated. “He told me to send for a Mr. Pinto—he said that he would act as banker.”

"Pinto ! Another of 'em ! Another Yid ! Let's see the letter—come along, Claudia, I've a right to see it." She gave it to him. He read it through, smiling from time to time, then handed it back to her. "Twaddle ! And I see that Pinto is to be *your* banker—no mention of me. How amusing ! That's right, Claudia, suck up to the old man, and see if you can't manage to squeeze a decent income out of him. 'My dear daughter' . . . 'our beloved daughter' . . . 'your dear mother' . . . 'gathered into our hearts'. Isn't it enough to make a decent man sick ! There, take it, and send for Mr. Isidore Pinto and see what you can get out of him. I have quite a few debts in Paris ; I might as well make hay while the glamour of a new 'beloved daughter' and this greatest of all great news lasts."

A week later, Claudia, accompanied by Isidore Pinto, with Francis following, his face twisted into a smile which was more than half a sneer, was escorted to the Calais train and taken to a reserved carriage. She was to travel like a princess, she was to give her orders to obviously important officials only. Rooms were reserved at the "Lord Warden" because Mr. Coster did not think it advisable that she should make the whole journey at once. Mr. Coster would see that the carriage was waiting at the London terminus. She was to have everything she needed.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Coster ; good-bye, Mr. Francis—and *bon voyage.*"

Claudia leant back and sighed contentedly. They had left Paris.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLAUDIA arrived in London alone. Francis had decided that there was no necessity for him to spend a night at the "Lord Warden", and had gone directly to London, only telling Claudia that he would "roll up at the Portland Square synagogue when the Jewish wailing is over and you've all settled down".

"Francis," she protested, "you can't leave me to meet your father and mother alone ! I shan't know them—it will be so difficult."

"Nonsense !" he replied, with that irritation which was becoming habitual to him whenever he spoke to her. "Don't be a fool, Claudia. You've got a tongue in your head, money in your pocket ; you don't need me to hang on to."

She had been nervous, apprehensive—she had even cried a little and despised herself for doing so. Then slowly, as the train carried her through the fields of Kent, past the old-fashioned cottages with their long, sloping roofs, through larch woods and past serenely flowing streams, her control returned. Indeed, she began to feel that it was rather pleasant to be travelling alone, to be able to think and plan, and build castles in the air. It was even rather exciting to try to imagine what these Costers would be like. How Francis hated the fact that he was a Jew ! Claudia wondered why. She had never met any Jews ; she had heard of their reputed meanness—well, nothing seemed more divorced from old Ferdinand Coster than that quality, she reflected. With all his Paris debts paid, with a roll of notes in his pocket, Francis had sneered and talked about "the return of the prodigal" and the "coming of the first-born".

"All part of the sickening sentimentality, Claudia," he assured her. "I know them. Wait until I've been home a fortnight, and see how much will be given to me then. It will be : 'Oi, oi—Francis wants more money ! We shall be

ruined !' I can tell you that Portland Square won't see much of me."

'I don't care what Francis says,' Claudia decided. 'That letter was the nicest thing that's come to me for months.'

Anyway, she reflected, anything, anywhere was better than having to face being ill in Paris. Anything was better than that heat, that noise, and that horrible, over-luxurious hotel. 'Luxurious,' she decided, 'but never comfortable—at least, never to me.'

The London terminus seemed friendly in its grime ; the voices of the porters were like music to her. She forgot entirely that she ought to look out for this father-in-law whom she didn't know, and was absorbed in explaining to a porter about her luggage when someone touched her arm. She turned to find a very small, dried-up little man at her elbow. He wore a loose black overcoat and a wide, soft-felt hat. His lined face was the colour of parchment, and two large, sad eyes met hers, eyes which reminded her a little of Vanity's.

"I think that I have the great pleasure to address Mrs. Francis Coster."

She smiled, amused at the stilted phrasing. "Yes, I am Mrs. Coster."

He placed his hand on his breast as if introducing himself, and said with some formality, "Then, if you please, I am your father-in-law, Ferdinand Coster."

"I thought that you might be, only I didn't want to make a mistake." Her doubts were dispelled ; this little man with the melancholy dark eyes and the soft lisping voice did not inspire her with any fear. Her courage returned, her vitality asserted itself.

"If you will wait a moment," she said, "I will go and see my big luggage out of the van. I have a porter here."

Ferdinand Coster looked not only surprised but slightly shocked.

"Indeed no !" he said, with more energy than he had previously shown. "I do not permit you to run after porters." He turned, and snapping his fingers called up a man who, Claudia thought, might have been a clerk. "Bilston, bring Mrs. Coster's luggage to the carriage—the hand luggage,

that is. See that the heavy baggage is sent up in the wagonette."

"Very good, sir."

"And"—Coster spoke impressively—"remember, Bilston, I will not have 'runners' arriving at the house. They distress Mrs. Coster. If there are any who wish to run with the wagonette, give them each somesing and send them away."

"Very good, sir."

Francis had said: "You couldn't miss our family hearse. The ugliest carriage in London. So look out for it if my father doesn't come to meet you."

It might be ugly, Claudia thought, but it was decidedly comfortable; and the glimpse which she had of the pair of bays gave her a thrill of satisfaction. Good blood, coats like satin, hooves well polished. What a lovely sight after the Continental horses—showy, prancing things, with no staying-power!

Seated beside her, Ferdinand removed his broad-brimmed hat and fitted a black velvet skull-cap on his head, then turned to her and smiled. There was a queer, wistful quality in that smile which touched Claudia.

"Now, for the first time," he said, "I am permitted to really see my beautiful and charming daughter. And where is Francis, please to tell me?"

She explained that Francis had come on to London the night before, that he said they were not to expect him at Portland Square "until he had finished . . ." Claudia hesitated, then went on firmly, "some important business which he had to attend to".

Coster nodded. "I see. Perhaps he need not have warned us. We have learnt never to expect Francis, because when we do he is certain never to arrive." Then, as if forcing himself to make an effort to be gay, he began to talk very quickly. "Oh, how excitet your mother is! All day she is laughing and crying, ordering this and cancelling that. I tell her that she will have the place like a madhouse before you arrive. She is so excitable, my wife. So kind—that is why I will not have her distress't at the sight of these poor runners. She sees them and wishes always to give them food and clothes

—always my clothes are being giffen away to poor men. I say to her: 'Leonora, soon I—Ferdinand Coster—shall have to go without clothes, for you will have giffen away everything what I possess to cover me.' Oh, she has such a beautiful heart, such a loff for all peoples. It is kind of you to come to us, dear Cludia, and we are so grateful." He stopped, and with a gesture which was both shy and tender laid his thin, brittle hand on hers. "Please try and like us, if that is possible for you. It is a dull house for you, but you must esk for everysing that you want. Whateffer it is, it will be obtained."

His soft voice, the gentle pressure of his hand on hers, made her realize again how lonely she had been, how much she had longed for kindness, and the knowledge that she was of importance to someone. Cludia's eyes smarted, she leant back for a moment against the cushions and closed her eyes. Coster made no comment, only his hand was laid a little more firmly on hers, and after a few moments she heard him whisper: "No, do not open your eyes—rest, Cludia, that is what is neetet—rest."

In fairness to Francis, Cludia had to admit that the exterior of the house was gloomy. It was so large, and the dark paint made it look like some kind of charitable institution. Coster helped her up the wide steps, the door was flung open, she caught sight of a tall butler standing aside to allow a woman to pass him—one of the most extraordinary-looking old ladies Cludia had ever seen. Leonora Coster was very short, immensely stout, so that her width seemed far greater than her height. She wore a very obvious black wig, and as she waddled forward her multiplicity of chins seemed to swing backwards and forwards. Cludia found herself clasped to a bosom which smelt of sandalwood, and felt the hard surface of a huge diamond brooch against her cheek. A voice which was even less English than her father-in-law's whispered endearing phrases in a wild mixture of broken English and what Cludia imagined must be Hebrew.

They passed through a black-and-white paved hall, where here and there the glimmer of a white-marble statue shone out through the gloom. There were immense velvet curtains, there were Persian rugs hanging on the walls, and with them

huge oil paintings in wide gold frames. To Claudia, it seemed that servants sprang up at every step, opening doors, holding back curtains, carrying on whispered conversations with their master and mistress, receiving a hundred orders, and being recalled so that those orders might be immediately countermanded. She was escorted into a huge drawing-room, furnished in pale-green satin embroidered with small pink roses. Her impression was that all the furniture was gilt, that the monstrous overmantel was gilt, as were the picture-frames, the clock with its attendant ornaments, and a huge cage in which several canaries fluttered. She was gently pushed into an arm-chair, while Coster and his wife tried to press cushions at her back, and a gilt footstool under her feet.

"There!" cried Mrs. Coster, standing back so that she might examine her better. "Now I can see my taughtter! Oh, Ferdinand, what a beautiful girl!"

"I'm afraid that I look dirty and dishevelled," Claudia ventured.

"Nossing, nossing! You shell have tea—a little brenty in it, no?—and then a bath, with the scent of sentalwood in it for the refreshment, and then in bed to rest."

"Oh, I don't want to go to bed!" Claudia protested. "It's nothing of a journey from Dover. I'm not tired."

Leonora Coster lifted her fat, beringed hands. "The brave schild, that it is. Listen, Ferdinand, she says that she's not tired. But of course you are tired—everyone is tired after a railway journey. I myself am always a dead woman! Ah"—as the door opened—"here is the tea."

Claudia thought that she had never seen such a display of silver as was carried in on a huge tray by a tall young footman, while the butler hovered round giving orders in a stage whisper like a presiding deity. More trays were brought, more tables were moved forward; cakes, fruit, sweets and biscuits appeared, and, lastly, the butler himself carried in a salver on which stood a small silver-mounted decanter containing brandy.

She refused to allow them to put brandy in her tea, though Coster said in his gentle voice: "Believe me, Cloudia, it is the very finest brandy—one huntrret years old already." As she sipped her tea and nibbled a cake, she knew that she was tired,

unbearably tired ; knew that she wanted to be left alone, to review her impressions, to realize that she, Claudia Coster, was to live in this immense house, with servants to do her bidding, with every luxury that money could obtain, and with these two kindly old people only too anxious to accept her as a daughter.

"And Frencis ?" Mrs. Coster demanded suddenly. "Where is he ?"

Her husband replied before Claudia could answer. "He is, so Cloudia tells me, engaget in somesing of great importance. Some business. He will come presently, she says."

She nodded her bewigged head ponderously. "I understent. Now, my dear, if you have finished the tea, you will come to your own rooms."

Again Coster engaged her in a whispered conversation of which Claudia only caught snatches.

" . . . is preparat ?"

"But, stupid one, have I not said so ?"

" . . . flowers, and the books, are there ?"

"Everysing, do I not tell you ? I myself have seen to it."

Low, wide marble stairs, covered with thick scarlet carpet, more massive pictures in immense frames, more statues, more servants. Mrs. Coster, panting a little, pressed her hand to her bosom as she mounted the stairs. Doors were flung open by maidservants. Whispered arguments : "No, not there—the next—that is better." And lastly : "Here are your own rooms, dear Cloudia. Here you will sit to read, to write letters, to ask your father and mother, sisters and brothers, to come and stay here. Here you will escape for fear the love of your new father and mother shall smother you. And through here is your bedroom, and again through there the room for Frencis, and here—open that door, Martha—your own bath-room. Now Martha will undress you, Martha will make a bath ready, and when you shall be comfortably in bed, maybe your old mother come and talk with you for a little while. So !"

Francis returned hours later, when she was lying in bed, content and still conscious that a sense of unreality existed, that all this wealth of kindness and consideration could not be true. He came in, flushed and ready to belittle everything.

Flinging down his hat, gloves, and light coat, he lit a cigar and sat down, his legs sprawled over the bright carpet.

"In bed! Oh, well, if you'll allow them to coddle and cosset you, they'll do it. I was told that 'Mrs. Coster' was resting, that the small drawing-room upstairs had been turned into 'Mrs. Coster's own sitting-room', that 'Mrs. Coster's maid had just left her'—and a lot more. Harper is an old smarming devil. Always toadied to my father! He knows which side his bread is buttered! I suppose there is somewhere for me to sleep in this royal suite, is there?"

Claudia held out her hand. "Francis, don't be unkind," she said. "They've both been so good to me. Don't try to spoil it. Let's try to start again."

He knocked the ash from his cigar on to the carpet, then smiled at her.

"Thank you for nothing," he said insolently. "I don't particularly want to—start anything. For God's sake, Claudia, don't let the family sentimentality infect you. That would be too much."

She saw very little of Francis during the days which followed. He rose late and never returned home until the early hours. More than once when Claudia lay awake she suspected that he was not sober, but he never made any reference to his stumblings and cursings and she deemed it wiser to keep silent. She knew that his affection for her was dead, faced the fact that she was only one of the numerous women who had, and always would, attract him. Sometimes she wondered if he had been faithful to her at all after the first excitement of their honeymoon. She remembered so many little incidents which in Paris had passed unnoticed and unremarked by her. Whispered conversations between Francis and his men friends, occasions when they had smirked or giggled, when they had stared at her, half contemptuous, half sympathetic. Those little notes which had come for Francis so often, which he had read quickly and then stuffed into his pocket, muttering, "Confound these damned tradesmen!" Those letters which he, who hated writing, had scribbled at her desk, smiling as he wrote, and which had always been sent off by hand. Looking back, she wondered how she could have been so gullible, so

blind. But what surprised her most was that here, in London, she knew that none of these things mattered to her any longer, that her love for him had passed, and that she realized to the full his essential weakness and unreliability.

'Perhaps,' she thought, 'it's scarcely fair to even blame him. He met me, loved me for a time, and—"got over me" as children get over measles or whooping cough. I had never met anyone like him—so handsome, so amusing, so able to make you feel that you were the one important thing in the world. Oh, well, I've been a fool, that's all.'

They had been back in London for a month when Claudia, descending the wide stairs, heard voices raised in anger. She was conscious that both Harper and Edward heard them too, but their faces were unmoved, giving not the slightest sign to indicate that the sound reached their ears as well as Claudia's. Suddenly the door of the library was flung open and Francis rushed out, his face distorted with anger. Seeing Claudia, he stopped, frowning with annoyance.

"Did you hear that pretty little scene ?" he asked.

"I heard that someone was angry, yes."

He turned to the morning-room and, jerking his head, demanded that she should follow him. As the door closed he began to pace up and down the room, talking rapidly.

"I shan't stand it ! I refuse to allow anyone to dictate to me ! It's insufferable. I've put up with it too long. My father——"

"Was the trouble caused because you were not in last night ?" Claudia asked.

Francis stared at her for a moment, then said : "Oh, you told him, did you ?"

"I told him nothing. I only knew that you had not been home, as I knew it two nights ago. Your father was very angry ?"

"My father is in his dotage, that's the only conclusion I can come to."

"Where were you last night ?" Her voice was perfectly even.

"I have explained that to my father. I don't propose to go into it again. Mind your own business !"

"You don't think that it is my business, then?"

He flung away and stood staring out of the window, his fingers twisting the cord of the blind into knots. "Oh, shut up! I don't want any nagging."

She drew a deep breath. She was going to face facts and, to Claudia, those facts were so unpleasant, so degrading, that she knew she needed to square her shoulders and fill her lungs before she could bear to drag them into the daylight of her own actual knowledge.

"I don't want to nag. I only want to ask you one question, and I want an answer which is the truth," she said.

"The old question, I suppose," Francis said. "Do I love you? That's it, is it?"

"No, I know the answer to that," she said. "I want to know how often you have been unfaithful to me."

He turned, his mouth a little open. "My good girl, what are you talking about?"

"You heard what I said."

He assumed an expression of deep concentration. "I seem to remember that once in Paris I had this flung at me! I think I answered you then. You ought to be damned well ashamed of yourself to even voice such a mean, low suspicion. I should never have thought it of you, Claudia, after all we've been to each other, after I've proved my devotion again and again."

He walked from the room, his figure very erect, the picture of offended dignity.

Claudia shrugged her shoulders. What a fool he was! And what a relief it was to know that he could never hurt her again. At last he had brought things to such a pitch between them that she didn't care. Nothing mattered. She had known that her love for him was losing strength; she had known that she no longer suffered acutely from his neglect, his sneers, or his abuse; but only now, for the first time, did she understand how completely she had ceased to care for him. She was immune, she was clad in armour, she was invincible. Francis might come to her weeping as he had done so often; he might return bringing expensive presents, flowers, and protest that he still adored her, that his nerves betrayed him;

he might add a long and elaborate story as to his whereabouts during the nights which he had spent from home. She had heard those same stories so often, full of circumstantial evidence, full of declarations that she could "ask George Graham" or "I tell you that I was in John's flat. Send a message round to him and ask if that's not the truth!" He might talk beautifully of love, quote as he had done so often :

"Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy :
Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love and eyes to see?"

She was free ! Once her child was born she need never see him again. It might be that his father and mother would no longer want her if she declared her intention of leaving him. Well, she would take the baby back to Yorkshire and bring it up at Marlingly. Only one thing affected her—she would never be hurt by him again, never again be disappointed in him. That period of her life was over and done with !

The days passed slowly for Claudia. She found that time hung very heavily on her hands, and gradually persuaded her mother-in-law to allow her to do a certain amount of supervision in the house. The staff was enormous, far larger than was necessary, Claudia felt, and, in spite of the numbers of men and maidservants, it was not particularly well kept. Dust lurked in corners, carpets and heavy curtains needed beating, and the amount of waste was appalling. Old Mrs. Coster, puffing a good deal, made her way downstairs once or twice a week to interview the cook. She remained there a very long time, and Claudia suspected did little else but chatter wheezily to the women servants.

"Always housekeeping has been a great mystery to me," Mrs. Coster told Claudia. "When I was a girl always we hed very many servants, men and wimmen. Always there was very much waste, but it was easier that way then to have fusses." She shook her head dolefully. "I neffer have been able to face fusses, Cloudia. They upset me, they make my heart to beat so fast. That cook, I know that she—what is it?—drops the wool ofer my face ! I know that pints and pints of cream, pounds and pounds of tea, much—very much coffee is stolen,

taken away, ruined. I have not the strength nor the breath to talk of these things."

"Then," Claudia said gently, "let me talk for you. Give me the right to speak to the servants, to the cook. I don't mind. At home we had only three women servants and an old man, and our house was as large—though not as comfortable—as this."

"But it will upset you," Mrs. Coster protested. "You are not strong just now; it will make you ill, perhaps injure the child—no?"

Claudia laughed. "I can't imagine a child of mine being upset or injured because I have a few words with a lazy, dishonest cook! I'm as strong as a horse, and aching to have something to do."

Gradually the reins were slipped from Mrs. Coster's plump hands and into Claudia's young and strong ones. The house began to look different, the food was better, the work done with greater method, and Ferdinand, glancing through the weekly books, lifted his hands in surprise.

"But—Cloudia—tell me, please—you don't go without anysing? You don't worry overmuch about these things? How is this? You save me very much money!" Then, to his wife: "This is not an ordinary girl, this Cloudia of ours, this is a financier."

"Indeed, indeed yes," his wife agreed. "She is cleffer. I have always been such a big fool, Ferdinand. I know. Oh yes, I have always known it."

He leant back in his chair, his dark eyes twinkling. "I would neffer have married a cleffer woman," he said. "I would neffer have married a woman like this dear Cloudia. For daughters, a man wants cleffer women; for a wife, he needs a fool. A beloved, wonderful, dear fool."

Claudia was very happy. She was superbly well, she was content in the love and affection of these two queer old people for whom she had grown to feel such an affection. She promised her mother that as soon as the child was old enough she would go north for a holiday; and as the days passed she knew that her thoughts turned again and again to the old grey house with its background of purple moors, to all the

homely, familiar things which had been part of her daily life before her marriage.

Once or twice her father wrote to her, and the change in his handwriting startled her a little. To her it seemed that he had grown old quite suddenly, that his feebleness was apparent in his writing.

Francis she saw very seldom. She never asked any questions regarding his movements, and he rarely offered any information. Even when he did, Claudia felt instinctively that he was voicing some elaborate untruth. It was a surprise to her, therefore, when early in October Francis reverted to something like his old attitude towards her. He would come into her room and talk of the last play he had seen, he even brought her flowers and books, he inquired almost tenderly as to how she felt, and, whenever his parents were present, his care of her was almost embarrassing.

Vaguely she wondered what was the reason for it all, for she had long since realized that he had no real affection for her.

'I wonder why this sudden change of front,' she thought. 'I know him too well to imagine that it means what it appears to mean. There's a queer twist in Francis. He hates being frank about anything.'

Once or twice she saw Francis exchange glances with his father, saw how they both smiled, and how the old man assumed an air of elaborate mystery. Half laughing, half exasperated, she challenged Ferdinand.

"I believe that you and Francis have some secret!" she said. "There's some plot afoot! Now tell me, what is it?"

Coster rubbed his hands, smiling delightedly. "No, no—there is nossing, nossing at all. In good time you will know—"

"Then there is a secret?"

"Oh, I talk too much. Do not ask. It is a surprise for you, dear Claudia."

One cold, blustering afternoon in the middle of October she sat in her own sitting-room, reading by the fire. The day had been wet and she had not ventured out; in consequence she felt heavy and rather stupid. Her back ached intolerably, and her head felt like lead. It would be a relief when it was over.

She was intolerant of illness in herself, though she could be

sufficiently kind and considerate to other people. For the whole of her life she had never known what it was to be ill, and the last few weeks had irked her terribly. She was growing impatient and restless. More, that nostalgia which so often overtakes the natives of Yorkshire in the autumn had caught her. She was weary of streets, she wanted wide stretches of country, keen winds which carried with them the tang of the North Sea, and all the sights and sounds of the countryside. She longed for the scent of the room where apples lay on racks for the winter ; she longed for the mellow flavour of the late pears, for bramble pudding, and for the smell of the bonfires of dead leaves and broken branches in the kitchen garden. She could hear her father's voice declaring : "That old fool Hutchins has been burning cabbage stalks again. Does he want to poison the lot of us ?"

At Marlingly, she thought, the air would be filled with the noise of rooks returning home ; the peewit would be circling over the bare, ploughed fields ; and at night the bark of a fox would come sharp and almost sinister in the night air. She could imagine herself returning home after a long tramp with Vanity, entering by the kitchen and listening to Ellen's broad, comfortable speech. "Naay, mind them clarty boots, miss, t' floor's just this minute washed an' plaace redded oop." Tea before a huge wood fire with fat rascals and tea-cakes, with home-made jam and oven cake. She sighed, conscious that London would never be home to her, and that she was homesick for her own country.

A knock on the door startled her from her thoughts, and a moment later Ferdinand Coster entered. His face was pale—like putty, Claudia thought—yellowish white with a hint of grey in it. His hands were shaking, and when he spoke his voice was uncertain.

"Father dear," Claudia exclaimed, "what is it ? Are you ill ?"

"No, not ill, Cloudia. My daughter, sit down while I talk with you. I beg that you will not be distressed, that you will keep calm."

"I shan't distress myself !" Then, with sudden impatience, "What is it ? It's not—you've not had bad news

about Robert—my brother ? Not of any of them at Marlingly ? Then tell me.”

“It is Francis—my son. My poor girl, he has left you.”

“Left me !” She felt that she could have shouted the words, that this was the most wonderful news that could have been brought to her. She had been more than a little disturbed at his recent change towards her, had feared that he might be preparing to propose a “new start”, and she had dreaded the scenes which might ensue. Now he had gone and she was rid of that poor, weak, lying thing who had been her husband. “Left me ? How ? When ?”

The old man made a great effort to control himself, then seated by her side, his hands on his knees, he told her all that he knew.

“Once again he has made a fool of me, that *gonoph* of a son ! Some days ago he came to me, he said that he wished to make a new beginning. He knew that he had been neglecting of you, that he had faults—oh, many of them, he said !—but now he wished that his beautiful wife and his child and he should be together. To have a home of his own was his ambition. I grieved that you would leave us, but I knew that he was right. He told me of a fine house, not too large—in Mayfair. I asked questions. All the answers were right. I saw the house—a pretty house it is. I gave him money—more than he asked—for advance rent, for decorating, for good furniture. ‘Have the best,’ I said. ‘A good beginning makes a good ending.’ That was our secret ! I was laughing all the day-time with joy. Now comes this message from him. A note written at his club. He left for Paris this morning. He will be crossing the Channel as we talk !”

Claudia glanced at the trees in the square, whipped backwards and forwards by the high wind.

“He won’t enjoy the crossing,” she said. “He’s a shocking sailor.” Then, as if the question were an afterthought, “Has he gone alone ?”

“Oi, oi, no. One wickedness was not sufficient. He is with a woman—it may be that you have heard of her—Mrs. Stanleigh, the wife of a soldier, a Captain Hector Stanleigh. She is known everywhere as a bad woman.”

She turned and caught his cold hands in hers, and tried to talk to him very gently and simply. It was difficult to explain that she felt nothing but relief, and yet not to wound him too deeply. His sad old eyes stared at her as if her meaning only partially reached him.

“You are not broken-hearted, then, Cludia ?”

“No, father. I don’t think Francis has meant anything to me for a long time.”

He sighed. “Ah, and yet he talked so beautifully of you to me a few days ago. Now why would he do that ?”

She smiled. “Francis always talks beautifully when he wants anything.”

“My poor wife is weeping. She is almost wild with grief—for you.”

“Then let us go and talk to her and explain, shall we ?”

“You feel sufficiently well ? It won’t upset you ?”

This time she laughed outright.

“Of course I am well. I am always well. Francis would have liked me better if I had clung and cried, and even fainted sometimes. I think he felt that I was almost unwomanly, that it was a little indecent to be so well when I was going to have a baby. Come, let us go and make mother stop crying.”

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

CLAUDIA's child was born in the third week of October. A girl, small, but perfectly healthy, its head covered with fine red-gold hair, its skin soft and delicate, and its lungs almost disturbingly strong.

During the days when she lay in bed, Claudia knew with a certain satisfaction that Francis was retreating further and further into the recesses of her mind. She remembered that he was tall, handsome, that he laughed a good deal, and that when he was disturbed or angry he pouted his full red lips like a child who is thwarted. She could recall things that he had said, even remember with vivid distinctness some of the clothes he had worn, but when she tried to hear in her mind the tone of his voice, it eluded her entirely. He was like someone she might have encountered on a long journey, and with whom she had talked and laughed, allowing their intimacy to develop very rapidly. Then they had parted, changed trains, and—that was all. She even found it difficult to associate him in any way with the child. More than once she tried to say: "Your father . . ." or "You aren't a bit like your papa"—but both seemed so utterly unreal, so meaningless, that she could have laughed. The child was hers, her very own. She was shared by no one.

"So I'm father and mother to you," she said gravely to the sleeping child. "Perhaps I'm really more fitted to be father than mother. Anyway, Francis Coster has no share in you—he'd never have been able to fight for you as I will."

The two old people rarely mentioned Francis, and Claudia, listening to them, detected through their shame at his flight and their anger at his baseness a faint note of relief. They were determined to lavish all their affection upon her and her child. They would have smothered them both in luxury, nothing was too costly, nothing too extravagant for them. The

child was the light of their eyes, and together they would lean over the cot where she lay, whispering to each other of her beauty and intelligence.

She had heard that Jews always hoped for sons and grandsons, but it seemed to Claudia that nothing could have been greater than their content in the grand-daughter which she had given them.

"She must have a very beautiful name," Mrs. Coster declared.

"To match her little face—what shall it be?"

Claudia watched them both, saw their kindly, intent old faces, heard the genuine love and affection in their voices when they spoke of her child, and suddenly determined what to call her baby.

"Her name is—what is the feminine of Ferdinand, please?"

"Of Ferdinand—why, Fernanda."

"Then her names shall be Fernanda Leonora. Could anything be nicer?"

For a moment they both beamed at her, their dark eyes misty. Then Coster cleared his throat, and with his hand on that of his wife, began to speak.

"Claudia, dear child, we have somesing to tell you. I am to blame that I have not been more frank with you, but we are lonely people—a rather sad people—"

"Until you came to us!" his wife interjected.

"Quiet, quiet!" Coster ordered. "Do we need to put a dot on every I and a cross on each T for Claudia, tell me? I say we were—is that better?—sad people, and sad people often grow frightened people, they fear to lose even what happiness they have. Now, Claudia, let me tell you. First our femilies came from Morocco—they were Moors. They travelled to Spain, and became almost Spanish. You know this, but what maybe you do not know is that always we have been Jews."

Their faces were so strained, so anxious, that Claudia said quickly:

"But of course I knew. Francis told me before we came to England."

"And you didn't mind this?"

"Mind!" she said. "Why and how could I mind? You don't mind the fact that I come from the north country, do you?"

Mrs. Coster said ponderously: "Oi, oi, Francis—the naughty boy—he minded. He hatet it. He begged us never to tell anyone. He said that all decent peoples hatet the Jews. That Jews were scum, and that he would have no chance in society if his friends knew that we were Jews!"

Her husband waited patiently until she stopped speaking, chiefly, Claudia felt, for want of breath, then he continued:

"Maybe we were to blame, Cloudia, that we did not insist he told people, maybe we were even disloyal to our own people because we never mentioned it to anyone. We are not from, not orthodox, have never been for many, many years. And sometimes at the back of my mind there was just a little fear that even here in England one day things might be made difficult for us. Oh, I know that England has been good, that she has allowed a Jew to fill the most honourable position in the country—that she has given titles and decorations to our people; but always that fear existet in my mind. I'm not a brave man, you see, I am nervous and timid. We thought that it might be you felt as Francis felt—that 'Jew' had the same meaning as rogue, cut-throat, swindler." He wiped his eyes, and trying hard to control his voice, added: "There again we were wrong, only we did not know you then."

Claudia smiled at them both—two rather pathetic old people, who longed to have someone on whom they might lavish their love and generosity. At that moment her whole heart went out to them.

"Clever, charming, entirely foolish father and mother," she said. "How could you make such silly mistakes? Give me my little Jewish daughter, and go and eat your dinners in peace."

That night she lay awake for hours, thinking. After Francis had left her she had wondered vaguely if the Costers would wish to keep her in their house once the child was born. She had always heard that Jews cared very little for girl children, and had almost expected them to show some disappointment at the fact that her baby was not a boy. Instead, they had

become almost idolatrous over the child, and had made it quite clear that they regarded her as the most beautiful of children.

Claudia had always faced life with her handsome head held high, her outlook had always been one of essential honesty. She had accepted all that the Costers had done for her with gratitude, but without humility. She was the wife of their son, she was the mother of their grandchild, and because of these facts she felt that she had a certain claim upon them. In return she had given them duty and affection, she had taken most of the anxiety of the house from Mrs. Coster's shoulders, and it gave her considerable satisfaction to notice how much more smoothly the household machinery ran since she had assumed control.

Now, as her strength returned, she knew that before long she would need fresh outlets for her energy. True, there was the house, but Claudia had no belief in keeping expensive servants and worrying herself unduly. She knew that to run Coster's house, to run it well and efficiently, would occupy only a small part of her time. There was Fernanda, and she had determined to give the child every chance. She was young, strong, and physically fit, and for the next year at least her child would make demands upon her, would need a considerable amount of her time. But later—Claudia frowned. Later she would demand more work, something which would give her additional interest, something which would eventually make her financially independent.

What was this business of Ferdinand Coster's? Was it so difficult to learn the prices, the characteristics, the natures of wines? If Francis had been sufficiently intelligent to contemplate entering his father's business, could it be so insuperably difficult?

"We're neither of us going to be hangers-on," she whispered to the child who lay at her side. "We'll accept money, comfort, clothes, and everything else, but we're going to earn these things just as soon as it's possible. I can't see myself at twenty settling down to do nothing but give orders to the cook, and then drive out in the Park behind two handsome horses, and have for my only excitement the buying of new clothes,

or the fact that some man may come along and want to marry me ! No, my precious, we're going to justify our existence, not develop into female editions of Francis Coster."

The days drew into weeks, and not until the end of January did they have news of Francis. Claudia was alone when Isidore Pinto was shown into the morning-room, for Ferdinand Coster and his wife were out attending a sale of antique furniture, this being one of their few real amusements. They had departed soon after breakfast, excited as two children going to a party, armed with catalogues and pencils, and promising themselves a day of complete enjoyment. Claudia had seen them go, smiling half tolerantly, half amused, at their eagerness. Why they wanted more furniture when the house was already far too full, she could not determine.

"I shall come back with that beautiful dower-chest," Leonora Coster declared, "and the brocade which will make exquisite panels for the dining-room."

"Pah !" Coster returned. "Of what use are dower-chests or brocade ? It is the Georgian silver tankards that are worth running after, and the salvers. Come, or we shall be late and all the best lots will be gone."

Claudia returned to her coffee, and sat reading *The Times* when Harper brought the news that "Mr. Isidore Pinto, Mr. Coster's Paris representative, would be glad if he might speak to you, madam".

Isidore Pinto was tall and elegant. A Jew who carried no apparent marks of his race. His oval face was thin, his nose finely cut and well shaped, his dark eyes bright and intelligent. 'A handsome man,' Claudia thought, as she had done when they met in Paris.

He advanced, his eyes showing clearly that the sight of her called forth his admiration.

"Mrs. Coster—I believe that the family, that Mr. and Mrs. Coster, are out this morning ?"

She laughed. "They have gone to buy old furniture, as happy as two children. Sit down, Mr. Pinto. Let me ring for more coffee, this is cold."

He seemed nervous, hesitating a little before he replied : "I think that it might be better to tell you why I have come, Mrs.

Coster. In a way I am relieved that you are alone. I have come direct from Paris to bring this news—rather terrible news."

"Then sit down. It will be easier to tell me, for you must be very tired." She knew as she spoke that he had come to bring news of Francis, and her first thought was: 'I'm glad they are out. Whatever it is, I can water it down for them, poor dears.'

"It is about"—she paused, ready for a moment to say "my husband", and changing it quickly to "Francis Coster".

Pinto bowed.

"He is dead, Mrs. Coster. I don't want to distress you with details. I have attended to everything, I assure you."

Very calmly she said: "But I want to know. Don't be afraid, you won't hurt me. Francis has not meant anything to me for a long time—before he left England everything was over."

"Ah!" Pinto sighed with relief. It would have been terrible had this beautiful young woman burst into tears—though it might have been a pathetic and almost charming duty to comfort her. He had always disliked Francis Coster, who had been overbearing and insolent to him. "You know that for some weeks he lived in an apartment with—a lady? Yes? She left him shortly before Christmas. She is now in the south of France—not alone. Then there was a young actress, married and with a husband who was very devoted to her. Briefly, your husband was killed in a duel—of an irregular nature—when this actor was defending the honour of his wife. Whether that honour was worth defending—who can say? If it had been in danger—who is to say that this danger emanated from your late husband? Mrs. Coster, will you accept this assurance from me? There are some things better left wrapped in the mists of uncertainty. This is one of them. I have attended to everything. All the papers, proofs of death, and other melancholy matters will be sent to you in a few days. I cannot—in view of what you have told me, in view of what I know—offer you my condolences; I can and do offer you my felicitations that matters—are no worse. I assure you that they might have been. Are you content to leave things at that?"

For a moment Claudia stared at him blankly. At that moment, and for a brief space, Francis was real again to her. She was back in the fields near Marlingly, listening to him boast: "There is no one like me—like us. We're unique, Claudia." She could see his fair hair shining as the light caught it, see his fine, narrow hands and his lips parted in a smile. Then quickly the mood left her and she nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Pinto, I don't want to know more than you have told me. I can't pretend that it affects me very much."

"I am relieved." His grave face broke into a smile. "I hear that the little girl is very beautiful."

"My baby? Lovely! That's not just the proud mother speaking, that's what everyone says. Would you like to see her?"

Pinto bowed, his smile widening. "Indeed, yes. It will be of particular interest to me, for I am a father myself. I have two children: the elder is two years old, he is Henri. Now, only six months ago, my wife gives me a beautiful birthday present—yes, on my birthday, think of it, Mrs. Coster—a little girl! Annetta is her name."

Fernanda was brought down, Pinto was persuaded to drink her health, coupled with the names of his own two children. He talked amusingly of them, of his home in Paris, his wife, and his poodle dog which, it appeared, was a marvel of intelligence. Claudia responded with stories of Fernanda, and others of Vanity, whose lowly birth she admitted, adding hastily that "mongrel dogs are always the most clever".

It came back to her with something of a shock that she and Isidore Pinto should be sipping sherry and eating dry biscuits, when Francis lay dead in Paris. Francis Coster, the man who had been her husband. Thinking of him again, she realized that her moment of clear recollection had gone and that she could not visualize him.

He had entered her life as such a vital force, possessing so much importance, then slowly he had drifted away and had ceased to be of any real personal value or interest to her, until now she had listened to the news of his death with less emotion than she would have felt for that of an acquaintance. As she listened to Pinto's stories, to his declaration that she

must come to Paris again—"one day"—and learn to know and understand that city, her mind continued to turn to thoughts of Francis Coster.

'He's dead,' she thought, 'but that is only the final closing of the book which I had ceased to read months ago. Now I am really free; now I can begin to work at living, begin to make something real of my life.'

It was less difficult than she had feared to break the news to the Costers. She told them what Pinto had said, and though Mrs. Coster wept intermittently for a few days, and the old man went about the house looking grave and depressed, Claudia felt that in their hearts they experienced a certain sense of relief that matters had been no worse. Bit by bit they told her of their son's treatment of them. How, from the first time he had returned from the expensive school where they placed him, he had despised them and their ways. He had laughed at them openly and never hesitated to demonstrate his contempt. He had never allowed them to meet his friends, never admitted either of them into his life.

"In fact, Claudia," Ferdinand said, "I was his banker and his mother was only an additional source from which he might draw money. It was a grief for many years—until towards the end we both ceased to look for kindness and only paid him a great deal of money so that he should not wound us with his words. You might say that we allowed ourselves to be blackmailed by our own son, because we were afraid of the pain which he might inflict upon us. Now—it is over!"

Claudia knew that these two old people, after the first shock of their son's death, began to enjoy their lives for the first time for many years. True, they were not particularly gay companions for a girl of twenty, they did not entertain, they liked to sit in over-heated rooms, talking very little, except when Coster recounted at great length all that had happened during the day at his huge warehouse and bottling stores on the south side of the river. Only then did his eyes light up and his speech become crisp and decisive.

To Claudia there was something almost romantic in this trade of his; she loved the names of wines, of places, loved

his descriptions of the various vintages and the stories which he told of some of his discoveries.

"I came to this little inn, Cloudia, I was driving through the country on my way to a sale. I asked if they had any brandy. Indeed they had, they told me, brandy which they sold to the country people from a great glass barrel. Not brandy at all—poison. But there were seven bottles which had been there for years. I asked to see them—and . . ." Ferdinand Coster would sit upright and recount with a mass of picturesque detail how he had discovered the seven bottles to be Cognac Napoléon, 1789. Or how, at some country sale where : "I went in order to buy a little Queen Anne silver tea-caddy which I had heard was to be sold. There was a small cellar—nothing of great interest they told me. 'No,' I said, 'nothing worth my notice.' Then I did notice somesing—a dozen and a half of Margaux '77, and one dozen and four of Lafite '75. These are days of red letters in my life!"

Gradually she persuaded him to tell her of the various types of wines, very often she would slip down to the warehouse and sit in his office, while he smoked his rare cigars and sipped an old brown sherry. Then he would open the storehouse of his mind and Cloudia, conscious that she was learning from a master, would listen absorbed and fascinated. Chambertin, Vougeot, Calvados, Musigny, Romanée St. Viraut ; she would hear of the wines of Anjou, the good Rhine wines, the healthy rough wines of Italy which, alas ! could not be shipped without the addition of more alcohol, "which destroys their character and makes them only rough and sour, instead of robust and kindly"; Burgundy, Touraine, Vouvray and Chambolle, she grew to know them all. She grew, too, to recognize the long, elegant bottles which contained the golden wines of Alsace; the darker and more clumsy bottles of the Burgundies and Anjous; the quaint, stumpy bottles which held liqueurs from the monasteries of Southern Europe. It was of his Spanish wines that Coster spoke with the greatest affection, deplored that it was so difficult to make them popular in England.

"Valdepenàs, when it has been in bottle for ten years—how good, how strong, what a heart it puts into a man ! The

sweet wines—for those who will drink them—Jerez, Malaga, Moscatel—wines for ladies, Cludia. The Marquis de Riscal, that is a red Rioja—there is a real delight ! Soller, white, and not costing too much, Olzinellas—these you may have either red or white ; and most charming, a very light, very dry sherry—Manzanilla.”

She listened, her hands clasped round her knees, her eyes so intent that Coster would stop and demand why she found it so absorbing.

“I want to know, father Ferdinand,” she told him. “I want to know it all. One day I will know it all, if you will be patient and teach me.”

There were great days when he tasted the wine, deciding which should be bought and which rejected. When the long row of glasses, each half filled and covered with a card, on the under-side of which the name of the wine, with its year and price was written were arranged in line. Coster, after inspecting the little saucer of coffee-beans with which he cleansed his palate after every taste, would begin his work. Gravely he lifted each card, taking elaborate care not to catch sight of the name of the wine, and sip the fluid. Then, according to his decision, the glass would be moved higher or lower in the long line. Then, sucking a coffee-bean, he would move on to the next.

Isidore Pinto, who came over from Paris for these ceremonies, was always filled with admiration.

“Never have I known him to make a mistake,” he said to Cludia. “Always when he comes to turn the cards the first place in the line is occupied by the best wine. There have been times when the shade of difference has been so slight that no one else could have detected it except Ferdinand Coster.”

Often Ferdinand would beg Cludia to taste various wines and arrange them as she had seen him do. She never developed his remarkable ability, but as time passed she grew to be a very fair judge, though the finest shades of taste always baffled her a little.

“Here are five sherries, my Cludia,” Ferdinand said one morning. “Now let me see what you think of them and how you describe them.”

Frowning with the effort she made to concentrate, she did as he bade her.

"This is very dry and light ; this is heavier and sweeter ; this is less sweet, but not so dry as the first ; and this"—she paused, tasted again, and debated with herself—"and this has a queer, rather smoky taste which I can't place."

Coster stretched out his hand and took the glass, tasted it, and threw back his head, shouting with laughter : "And that," he said, "is—just corked !"

Knowledge came to her with listening to his conversations, with study—for she read every book on the subject of wine that she could find ; and later, when it was possible to leave Fernanda for longer periods, she began to study the practical side of the great business. Bottling, shipping, storing, the proper temperature of the cellars, labelling, invoicing and packing. Nothing was too small for Claudia Coster to note and remember.

I am consciously happy [she wrote to her brother Robert] because, for the first time in my life, I am actually learning something which will be of practical use. I sometimes wish that I had known sooner what a fascinating study this is, then I might have been tempted to ask you to take it up so that we might be together. Still, I am certain that you could not do better than remain under Edward's supervision. If only I didn't miss you all so badly—life would be enormous fun.

She longed to go back to the north, and yet, whenever she mentioned it, Leonora Coster wept and Ferdinand assumed that air of gloom which seemed to tinge the whole house with melancholy. In addition, she was afraid of the cold and the long journey for Fernanda, and it was not until March that she left Portland Square with Fernanda and the expensive nurse whom Coster had engaged.

Charlotte wrote, begging her to come home. Her father was ill, so ill that they feared he might not recover, and, for the first time, neither of the Costers raised any objection to her going away. Their evident anxiety for her, their solicitude for her comfort, and their distress at the illness of her father,

touched Claudia very deeply. True, they had been selfish, had done their best to prevent her leaving them, but now, when a real reason for going north came they did everything in their power to make her departure and her journey as comfortable and as expeditious as possible.

As the train left London and made its way through the Midlands, Claudia was conscious of a growing excitement. Not even the fact that she was returning to anxiety and a disorganized household could subdue her delight. She looked tolerantly at the wide Leicestershire fields, the spreading trees, and the small, gently flowing streams. It was cared for, pretty, and luxuriant. As the character of the country changed, she sat stiffly upright in her corner, her hands clasped, her eyes very bright. That slight air of condescension which attacks all Yorkshire folk when they look at any county other than their own, left her. The nurse, glancing at her mistress's face, wondered what there could be in the tall chimneys and dirty foundries, slag tips and cinder banks, to cause her to assume that expression of almost childish expectancy.

In her elaborate widow's weeds, which she hated because she felt that they made her look theatrical, Claudia seemed taller than she really was. Her brilliant hair, showing from beneath the little "Marie Stuart" bonnet, seemed to flame in protest against the heavy black and its wide bands of crape. The nurse felt that it was a little undignified for a lady of such obvious importance as Mrs. Francis Coster to spring to her feet and seize the baby, carrying it to the window, crying in an unfamiliar voice and accent : "Theer, my luvey, theer's t' first sight o' t' Broad Acres !"

The factories were left behind, the ugliness made by man's hands disappeared, and in their stead there were green fields, high, rounded hills, and rushing, turbulent brown streams, which tore down the hillsides, flinging themselves over boulders and jagged rocks in a spatter of white foam. Here and there in the midst of green grass a huge mass of stone reared up, a relic of some dim, past age when the countryside had been covered with a glacier moving slowly and surely towards the North Sea. The sky seemed to have receded, to be higher and wider than in London. As the train passed,

Claudia caught sight of the white bob-tails of startled rabbits ; and once a hare sat still as if transfixed by the sight of the white steam from the engine which the wind caught and whirled over the fields.

As they neared York, Claudia rose and stood looking out, unbearably moved by the first sight of the Minster towers. There, too, were the old walls and the wide, slow-moving Ouse. She pressed her hand over her heart as if to steady its beating. This was home.

On the platform, where they were to change into the little local train, she flung up her head, sniffing like a dog who picks up a scent.

“It smells different from London, doesn’t it ?” she said to the nurse, who wrapped Fernanda more closely in her cashmere shawl, and replied guardedly :

“It does indeed, madam.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE little train which was to carry them to Marbury was waiting. It was not particularly comfortable, even the first-class carriages being small and desperately dusty and stuffy. Nothing could dim Claudia's happiness ; she sat with her hands clasped, her eyes almost startlingly blue, watching the landscape slip away from her view. She knew every field, recognized every farm and cottage, every hill in the distance was a friend. For the sheer joy of hearing the broad vowels of her native country she asked a porter at Hellersley :

“Is this right for Marbury ?”

“Marbury, laady ?” he replied. “That's reit. Tauton, Crudlethorpe, an' Marbury. Ah doubt as yer a bit on t' laate side terday, all t' saame, another twenty-five minutes 'ul see yer theer.”

Smiling, she was about to resume her seat, when she heard a voice calling her name and, looking out, saw Edward Bower running down the platform towards her. He leapt in as the train began to move, and flung himself down opposite to her. He grasped her hand, his grey eyes seemed more protuberant than ever. Claudia thought : ‘How heavy he's grown ! He looks fifty.’

“Well, Claudia—I mean Mrs. Coster—this is pleasant. How well you look ! Splendid ! By Jove, it's wonderful to see you again !” Then he remembered that she was wearing widow's weeds, and thought that possibly he ought to modify the lightness of his words and reduce the smile which had sprung to his lips. Adopting a more serious tone, he said : “I was sorry to hear of—of your loss, Claudia. Dreadful—he was quite young, too.”

For a moment she longed to tell him the whole story, to recount it as if it had nothing to do with her, telling it impersonally. She thought how surprised Edward would look, how his mouth would open in astonishment, if she said that Francis had left her some weeks before he died, that he had

gone to Paris with another woman, who in her turn had left him. That he had been killed fighting an actor who was defending his wife's honour—and last of all, that she had felt no trace of regret. Instead she replied : "Yes, it was very sad. But you've had losses, too, Edward."

He nodded, his stolid face grave. "Ay, my poor old father. I miss him, Claudia."

"Poor Edward!" Then, with an effort to turn their conversation into happier channels, she said : "You haven't seen my baby. Look at her, Edward. She's charming."

Obediently he shuffled along the seat and peered at Fernanda.

"Turn her so that Sir Edward can see her, nurse."

The title impressed the woman, who looked at the stout, elderly gentleman with the queer accent, more attentively.

"Your eyes, Claudia. She looked at me very straight, I can tell you."

"My hair, too, only let's hope not my temper."

"Your temper was always good enough."

"Time has dimmed your memory," Claudia laughed. "Oh, Edward, tell me about things at home, at Marlingly. Mother writes that father isn't well. And Harriet seems wretchedly ill, too."

He nodded. "Ay, I did hear that your father wasn't in very good shape. I don't really know much about Mrs. Broom. I'm not much of a church-goer, and Victor Broom and I—well, we've never been the best of friends."

"He's never been a friend of mine!" Claudia said sharply. "Now tell me about the factory and Robert, Edward."

His face lit up immediately. "Oh, they're both all right. Robert's as clever as paint, though I don't think his brains lie in the way of designing so much as in the executive line. Robert can sell the stuff we make like hot cakes. He's got charm, Claudia. People take to him, he interests them. Oh, Robert's all right. The works are going ahead. I wish you could come over and see the place. Land's cheap ; we've got the railway, and it's a proper miracle how the land's being taken up. Mark my words, in another fifteen or twenty years Cradethorpe 'ul be one of the coming places in the north. Now we've got electricity for lighting, it won't be long before

we shall have it used everywhere for power. That's what's going to revolutionize everything. I've been over at Hellersley this afternoon to see about some more land I want, joining the works ; belongs to a chap who lives there. 'D'you want it ?' he said to me. I said, 'Nay, I don't know that I want it so particularly, but I need it, that's the point.' " He laughed, as if the remarks struck him as astonishingly funny.

Claudia's air of amused interest left her. She frowned, her face intent and serious.

Edward thought : 'By Jove, she's a lovely piece ! I wonder if she'd ever look at me ?'

"Electricity, Edward ?" she questioned. "That's an idea. We ought to have it in the warehouse, in the cellars. We need more machinery, too. I hate this waste of time in washing, labelling, and all the other things that could be done so much better and more accurately by machines. I must think it over. You've given me lots of ideas. Is all your stuff agricultural ?"

"Used to be—it's not now. We've expanded, Claudia. Harrows, ploughs, chaff-cutters, cake-cutters and the like wasn't sufficient. We're on to dairy machinery now, and one of my lads has an idea for a new lawn-mower. It's pretty well all fish that comes to my net. That's why we're paying the dividends we do." He leaned forward, his short-fingered hands opening and shutting with excitement as he talked to her of his plans. "Never stand still—what was good enough for the farmers of twenty years back isn't good enough for the men of today. . . . They're conservative, all right, but there's a new feeling of progress creeping in. It's everywhere. I tell you, Claudia, the whole world's feeling it. Men and women alike. People round here laugh at these women doctors, women wranglers—well, let 'em laugh. They'll laugh the wrong side of their faces when they understand that while they've been splitting their sides, the others have walked past 'em. I've installed a telephone. To you, I'll admit that it's more bother than it's worth—as yet. Mark that, Claudia, *as yet* ! It won't always be. This electric light in the factory. I don't say that I don't have the alternative lighting always ready, I have, but I shan't always have to. It's the time for young people. Look at the Chancellor of the Exchequer—not as old as I am. There

was a time when they'd not have looked at a man who wasn't tottering to the grave ! I'm all for the young 'uns. In my works I watch 'em like a cat watching mice. And it pays me. I pay them and pay 'em well—and they pay me back in ideas and new notions, improvements and designs." He stopped suddenly.

"Sorry, I've been running on like a house a-fire."

"But I'm interested, Edward. I want to know, because you're giving me ideas. I want to work, to—to justify my existence. I want to make Coster's not only reputable, I want it efficient, up to date. Whenever you have anything that might be useful to us, let me know. Come to London some day. Let's go round the warehouses and the cellars, let me tell you where I think we waste time and money and muscle—help me to get it right."

Edward Bower stared at her, his florid face redder than ever. "By gum," he said, "I like your pluck." His broad hand shot out and clasped hers. "I'm on your side all the road," he said. "I always knew that you were different from the others—more grit, more common sense. Good luck to you !"

At Marbury his carriage was waiting.

"Marbury's nearer to Seston," he told Claudia, "than what Crudlethorpe is. D'you know what I'm going to have one day ? Don't laugh—a horseless carriage ! Ay, make no mistake about it, they'll come, and come before we expect them."

The old gig was waiting for Claudia. Edward fussed and fumed, protested that she must take his carriage, but she shook her head.

"No, Edward. If you want to be really kind, drive Nurse and Fernanda to Marlingly, but let me go in the gig. I've not smelt Yorkshire lanes nor seen Yorkshire fields and Yorkshire becks for—oh, it seems years. I don't want to be shut up in a carriage, even such a comfortable carriage as yours. Nurse, will you take Fernanda with Sir Edward ? Good night, Edward, and thank you. Yes, I will try to come over to Crudlethorpe."

In the high, shabby gig she glanced at the young countryman who drove. A fresh-faced lad, in an old livery coat and ordinary working trousers. He was new, she decided. Perhaps old Hutchins had grown too old for his work.

"You're new to Marlingly ?"

"Yes'm. Ondly been 'ere aboot three month. Ah'm nephew o' old chap as uster work fur Mr. Marsden, George 'Utchins."

"I see. How is my father, do you know?"

"Ay, Ah did 'ear as 'e wean't ower clever terdaay, poor gentleman. Cook said as t' missus weer prop'ly worried."

"And Mrs. Broom? How is she?"

"Naay, Ah did 'ear as she wean't so clever, neether, mum."

Claudia sighed. She felt that she had plunged into a sea of illness, and the thought saddened her. The light was beginning to fade and the landscape was bathed in a soft, golden light. The long line of hills was outlined in pale orange, and yet over everything there was a faint hint of melancholy, as if the land mourned the death of another day.

'But it's home,' Claudia thought. 'It's where I belong. I talked to Edward of making Coster's up to date and efficient, but Coster's is only a means to an end. Coster's shall make money for me, for Fernanda, money that we can spend here on Marlingly, in our own country. I'll do my duty to those two dear people; I'll stay with them so long as they need me; but when they don't want me any longer, I'll come back. Like the Great North Road that runs straight and wide, direct to the heart of the north country, that's how I'll run my life. I'll wait, I'll work, but always keep the image of The Road before me, and one day I'll take it and come back—where I belong.'

Just before they reached Marlingly, Edward's carriage passed them, and he put his head out of the window to call that he had deposited the nurse and baby, and that he wished Claudia "Good night".

"Good night," she called.

The lad who was driving gave her the unnecessary information: "Sir Edward Bower! Varry well-liked gentleman hereaboots."

"Mr. Robert is in the works at Crudlethorpe," Claudia said.

"Ay, in t' works Mr. Robert is. They saay as 'e's doin' varry well theer an' all." He laughed sheepishly. "Moastly iveryone likes Mr. Robert, reit gentleman 'e is. 'Ere's gaates, mum. Keep a tight 'old, fur sometimes t' mare tak's intiv 'er 'ead ter slither aboot a bit 'ere. Naay, be'ave thysen!" to the

mare. " 'Old oop, can't yeer? Naay, that's a grand lass, theer now!'"

In the dusk, Marlingly seemed to Claudia to have shrunk, the gates seemed smaller, less important, and in more need than ever of a coat of paint. The laurels which bordered the drive wanted cutting back, and, as the setting sun caught the house, she felt that there was a wistful pathos about it. The yellow walls were peeling, the stone was discoloured and showed lichen patches, the general appearance was that of a place which had seen its best days, a place which had been denied all repairs and which was rapidly sinking into decay.

Charlotte stood at the door, her hands stretched out in welcome. Her hair had lost much of its colour, her face was older and more careworn, and Claudia saw new lines and wrinkles graven there.

Catching her wide skirts close, Claudia sprang down and ran to her.

"Mother! It's nice to be home."

Her mother caught her in her arms for a moment, then held her at arm's length, watching her.

"How splendid you look! So well, and, my dear, what wonderful clothes! Even though you're in mourning, you couldn't look better. And the little girl! She's gone to the old nursery. Her nurse—and what a dignified person, Claudie!—asked me to remind you that . . ." Charlotte hesitated, a little confused. Claudia caught her hand and kissed it.

"Darling! Just the same queer, shy mother, aren't you? That's all right. Come up with me and tell me everything."

As she sat on the little low nursing-chair, which she remembered had been Robert's favourite seat, feeding Fernanda, Claudia listened to her mother's news. The gentle, half-timid voice seemed to be charged with anxiety, and as she listened Claudia unconsciously drew Fernanda closer to her, as if she would protect her from all the troubles which had robbed her mother's voice of its energy and colour.

"It's a sad home-coming for you, Claudie," Charlotte said. "Your father is very ill. Well, Dr. Rawlinson doesn't seem to know exactly what it is. His heart isn't very strong, and—there are complications."

Claudia thought: 'Even when papa is dying they can't

bring themselves to give the names of diseases ! How funny she is, dear mama—almost pathetic !

“Yesterday,” the gentle voice continued, “we were afraid that we should lose him. I thought that perhaps I ought to send for Robert. You see, he lives in rooms in Crudlethorpe, so as to be near the works.”

Claudia shook her head. “No, don’t send for Robert. Don’t let him watch things that will hurt him, stay with him all his life and sadden him. Leave him where he is.”

It was a relief to Charlotte Marsden to realize that Claudia could make decisions, that Claudia would take the reins into her strong young hands. Charlotte had grown a little weary of contriving, of managing the house, and striving to make sixpence do the work of a shilling. Lately, ever since Thomas had been taken ill, the house had seemed to lack any life, it was as if its pulses had ceased to beat, as if it had found life too hard to battle against. Now, with Claudia seated before her, the light catching her red-gold hair, her voice clear and strong as she asked questions, Charlotte felt a content which she had not known for many months. Claudia was home. Claudia would arrange everything. Claudia would assume the burdens and carry them lightly on those fine shoulders.

“And now—how is he ?” Claudia asked.

“He was asleep when you came. I thought it better not to disturb him. He sleeps so little.”

“And Harrie ?”

Charlotte Marsden twisted her fingers together nervously. She had never found it possible to talk to her children easily, and here was Claudia demanding news of her sister. Still, now Claudia was a married woman, a widow with a child of her own, it was foolish not to speak frankly to her.

“After her last baby was born she was terribly ill.”

Claudia nodded. “I know. You told me. Then he died, didn’t he, of fits ?”

“Convulsions, poor little soul ! Such a pretty little boy ; it was so dreadfully sad.”

“Yes.” The young, vital voice hardened. “Go on—and now ?”

“Victor took Harriet to see a specialist in London. His fees were enormous, but then Victor never grudges Harriet anything. I know that you have never liked him, Claudia,

but in common fairness I must admit that he is a devoted husband."

Fernanda, satisfied and content, slept in her mother's arms. Claudia was staring into the fire, her foot tapping gently on the rail of the low fender. Without facing her mother she asked: "And now, what is the matter?"

"Well, you see, the specialist, Sir Matthew Foster, said that Harriet must have no more children. Harriet says that he spoke very seriously about it, and that he was alone talking to Victor for quite a long time. Then, just after poor little Cuthbert died, Harriet was so upset because she found that she was going to have another baby."

"My God!" The exclamation startled Charlotte. It came to her ears with a tone of such bitterness, such intense disgust.

"It did seem rather dreadful," she admitted weakly.

"Seem rather dreadful!" Claudia's bright blue eyes met hers. "It's not dreadful, it's murder! Go on, mother; and when is this next child to arrive?"

"Darling," her mother remonstrated, "don't get so excited! These things do happen, you know. Well, poor Harriet was so distressed, so frightened, and it was just after Cuthbert's death and—well, she lost the baby. Since then she doesn't seem to regain her strength at all. She has everything that money can buy. Victor scarcely leaves her, but—oh, Claudia, I'm afraid that we're going to lose her."

Her mother's tears drove the hardness from Claudia's eyes, softened the lines of her mouth. She laid Fernanda down and, going to her mother, dropped on her knees beside her.

"There, dearest, don't cry. It's all going to come right. You're tired, you've had too much worry to shoulder. Never mind, I'm home again. I'll attend to everything."

Later she saw her father. He lay in the huge four-poster in which his three children had been born, looking shrunken and frail. His big hands were folded outside the coverlet, and they seemed to Claudia to be startlingly white and thin. Those hands, lying so still, brought home to Claudia as nothing else could have done the fact that her father had almost finished with life. His eyes brightened a little when he saw her, and as she stooped to kiss him, he whispered hoarsely:

"That wretched mongrel of yours is all right, Claudiie."

As she sat in her big, shabby, rather bare bedroom that night—a bedroom that was so different from her own luxurious room at Portland Square—Claudia tried to understand what was going to happen. Her father was dying, her sister would probably follow him. Her mother had always hated Marlingly, always disliked the bleak, cold north. She would return to her beloved Tunbridge Wells. She had longed for years for its more gentle atmosphere, its comfort and lack of worry. Robert ! As she thought of him, Claudia's face softened. He was eighteen. Edward had praised him, had said that he had charm and that he would do well. Robert's ways would not lie in and around Marlingly.

In her desk lay a piece of paper, that piece of paper which her father had written on years ago, declaring that Marlingly was hers. She would rob no one. Her mother would be relieved to get rid of the place, Robert would neither want nor need it. She would take it and keep it in order until such time as she could come back to it, live in it, and set it in order once more. She rose and walked to the window, standing there looking out, while Vanity thrust her long, thin nose into her hand. Together they stood—the girl and the long-legged dog—and for a long time neither of them moved. Claudia was seeing again the country she loved ; Vanity was content that her mistress had returned.

The night was very still and, although the light had died long ago, there was a subdued radiance over everything. The tall trees stood like sentinels, the thick, untended bushes assumed strange shapes in the half-light, and the badly kept lawn stretched like a dark carpet in front of the old house.

Claudia folded her arms on the sill, and, despite the cold air, leant forward eagerly. The scent of the country reached her, soft, sweet and clean. A faint wind stirred, making the tree-tops quiver. On it came the tang of salt from the distant sea. Far off she heard the church clock strike the half-hour ; somewhere a bird rustled in a bush, crying as if in fear ; and once a small beast in an adjoining field lifted up its voice in protest, hunger or apprehension.

As Claudia listened for all those sounds which she had known so well, her ears, blunted by the noise of the city, grew keener, and she realized that there is no real silence in the

night. Slowly she recognized a dozen sounds : the bark of a fox, the squeak of a mouse ; once a ewe called a straying lamb back to her side ; far away from Henderson's farm came the harsh bark of a dog, and a second later the crowing of a startled cock. There were rustlings, scufflings, there were the sounds of little scurrying feet or the scratching of tiny claws. An owl hooted and in her loose box the raking chestnut mare stamped restlessly. Inside the old house, death was drawing nearer and nearer, while outside, life filled every field, every little wood, every tree. She had talked that evening to Dr. Rawlinson, who had eyed her with increased respect because she was Mrs. Francis Coster, and expensively dressed.

"Would you like another opinion for my father ?" she had asked.

He shook his untidy grey head. "I don't think there is any good purpose to be served, Mrs. Coster. He's just worn out, like a machine that's—past repair."

"He's not old ! Barely fifty."

"He's lived hard. All his generation did."

Vaguely she wondered what her mother felt. Was she regretting the fact that he was leaving her ? Did she look back at the time when they had been lovers, when he had first brought her home to this house, which he had of late years only regarded as a source of income ? She knew that he had sold everything of value, sold land, farms, and had grumbled and cursed the place when there was nothing left which was saleable. It was strange, Claudia thought, that Marlingly meant nothing to any of them except herself. Mama wanted Kentish hop-fields, wanted the shops under the Pantiles, the pleasant hotels and neat streets, well-kept roads with their trim villas. Robert wanted machinery, cog-wheels, belts, the excitement of new inventions, and the joys of salesmanship. Harriet—Claudia frowned—Harriet wanted nothing but Victor, and his endless demands upon her strength and youth.

Her hand caressed Vanity's smooth head.

"This is where I belong," she said softly. "This is my heritage. I want to use my brain and will and energy, so that one day I can come back here to my refuge, my strong tower. Come back to make it as sound, water-tight, well kept and cared for, as it has a right to be. This is where my baby shall

be brought up, where the air is clean and sweet, tinged with the power of the sea and the strength of the hills. This is where she shall grow straight and fearless, able to stand on her own feet and fight her own battles. Not in London, where she'll only be one in a huge crowd. She'd be swamped there, made to conform to a pattern. No one there has any time, they all hurry and scurry. No, that's no place to bring up a child—my child."

Through the following days Claudia's thoughts turned again and again to her fixed determination. She never worried over details. Once her mind was made up she left them to take care of themselves. She possessed, even at twenty, a remarkable patience, an ability to wait and watch circumstances develop in her favour. It was not in her to doubt that what she planned would come to pass. She was ready to work to attain her wishes, willing to plan and scheme to bring about what she desired, but she was never impatient, and she never grew disheartened or fearful. As she walked in the old kitchen-garden, with its twisted fruit trees and little, clipped box-borders, she watched it all with kindly, possessive eyes. One day it would be hers, and one day she would have sufficient money to lavish care upon it, to restore it to a state of real efficiency and beauty. It had been denied those things for so long. "Be patient," she said, "as I'm going to be. It shall be done—one day—I promise you that."

Her mother joined her, heavy-eyed after a long night's watching.

"He is very weak, Claudia," she said. "I mustn't stay long."

It struck Claudia that they both knew her father was dying and yet neither of them, in their conversation, ever used the word "death". Neither of them speaking of those things which were uppermost in their minds, neither voicing their hopes and fears for the future, once the old order should be changed.

With her arm through her mother's, Claudia paced the narrow paths.

"It's nice to be home again," she said.

"You like Marlingly?"

"Me? Like it?" Then checking herself in her emphatic reply, as if she feared that she had betrayed herself, she said temperately: "Yes, I'm fond of the place."

"And I," Charlotte said, with sudden and rather dreadful bitterness—"I have always hated it. From the first day your father brought me here, I've been unhappy."

"Poor mother! Perhaps one day you'll be able to go and live with grannie."

"Perhaps. And yet," she said slowly, "it seems rather dreadful that I can only leave here through the death of the person who first brought me to Marlinsky."

Thomas Marsden died that afternoon, when the sun slanted feebly into the big bedroom, touching the heavy brocade bed-hangings. To Claudia the air felt heavy and stagnant, as if tinged with death already. Dr. Rawlinson had bent over the bed, then, with his hands palm inwards against the small of his broad back, stood upright and beckoned Charlotte to come forward.

She stood looking down at the man who for so many years had been nothing more than a friend, whose extravagances, ill-tempers and recklessness she had possessed no power to control. Life had not been very generous to either of them, she thought. Thomas was little more than a stranger to his children; she had ceased to be his wife years ago. With a strange, tender impulse she laid her hand on his. He had been like a child, running from one bright object to another all his life—women, horses, cards, dogs, foolish speculations. She felt no sense of reproach; she had accepted him for what he was for too long. Now she grieved because his life had been wasted, had produced so little, and he was dying without any real regret from anyone.

He opened his eyes, from which the bright blue seemed to have faded. His mouth and nose were pinched like those of an old man. Charlotte moistened her lips which were suddenly dry.

"Thomas . . ."

The pale eyes wandered, and came to rest at last, staring up into her own.

"Lottie—I've not made much of a job of things, eh?"

Moved again by a wave of pity, she bent and kissed his forehead. His eyes closed, fluttered open again, then closed once more.

CHAPTER THREE

CLAUDIA refused to visit her sister until the funeral was over. She said that she had too much to do, too many matters which demanded her attention. In reality she knew that she dreaded meeting Victor Broom ; she felt instinctively that their meeting would end in a quarrel and the idea of discussions, arguments and recriminations while her father lay dead was distasteful to her.

Not that his death affected her materially. She had known him so little, and his easy-going attitude towards life had irritated and angered her. True, there had been days when they had walked together, when he had talked to her of the countryside, of the land and farming, and at those times they had drawn closer to each other. Her feeling was that she had lost a friend who, while never particularly loved or greatly admired, had been pleasant when they met at rare intervals.

Robert cried a little when he was taken into the big bedroom, but Claudia felt that it was more from overwrought nerves and fear than from actual grief, for soon after he was talking excitedly to her of his determination to make good in his work.

He was a strikingly handsome lad, with Claudia's bright colouring, with her vivid hair and brilliantly blue eyes, his skin was clear and he held himself well. Claudia, watching his animated face, wondered if perhaps his round, cleft chin were not a little weak, then mentally rebuked herself. 'He's only a boy ! Strength will come later.'

"Lovely to have you home again, Claudiie," Robert said. "I've missed you."

"Have you ?" She could not hide the gladness in her voice, and, stretching out her hand, laid it on his. "I'm awfully interested in your work, you know, Robbie. I do want you to do well. Edward expects you to."

As he talked, Claudia thought that she felt towards him as she might have felt towards a son, tender, protective, and yet

anxious to spur him on to do his best and justify her pride in him.

"Tell Carter to make your black suit longer in the tails," she said. "Those are too short. You're the head of the house, and you must look like a man, not like a sixth-form schoolboy."

He smiled. "I should say that you were the head of the house, Claudie. It seems funny to see you in widow's weeds—all wrong, somehow." Then, fearing that he might have hurt her, he added: "I didn't exactly mean that; only you're awfully young to be a widow, aren't you?"

Other people found her very young to do all she did. In the kitchen she gave orders, demanded that this and that should be done, interviewed undertakers, talked to the farmers who came and offered themselves as bearers, even walked down to Potter's Orchard to inspect the farm-cart which was to bear Thomas Marsden to the church. There was a maturity about her, a dignity which never degenerated into conceit or undue self-assurance. She gave her orders as if she never doubted that they would be obeyed, and yet contrived to remain courteous and even faintly deferential to her elders.

Charlotte, realizing for the first time how much the strain of the past years had tired her, was thankful to leave everything in her daughter's hands. Only when she talked of the preparations for the luncheon which was to be provided, did Charlotte protest a little.

"For thirty-five people, Claudia! And refreshments for as many more! My dear, it's going to be terribly expensive! I don't suppose there is any money at all. Couldn't we manage more simply?"

Meditatively Claudia pinched her lip. "I don't think so," she said. "You see, it's the last thing we can do for him, and here in the north those things mean so much. They'd feel that we'd cheated him out of what was his due. He'd have hated it, it would have made him miserable to have been denied a proper funeral. The money—oh, don't worry over that, darling. I'm quite able to afford it—you forget that I'm fairly well off in these days."

So the funeral arrangements were made with proper attention to detail, a vast meal was provided, and not one of the

conventional trappings of woe was omitted. They followed Thomas Marsden as he lay on the meticulously clean wagon, whose crude red and blue paint looked strangely out of place among the black clothes of the mourners. The four heavy farm-horses dragged the cart, for even though Thomas Marsden might have neglected his land, might have treated such land as remained to him without either care or consideration, yet he retained the right to be buried as a farmer, and to be escorted to his grave by the yeomen farmers of the district. The procession wound through the narrow lane to the lych gate, where Bower of Seston, Veysey of Clartbeck, Wilson of Hartburn, Thorpe of Brigend, Harris of Potter's Orchard, and Manson of Clay's End strained and heaved the coffin on to their broad shoulders and carried it to where the Parson waited for them, his book open in his hands, his black boots looking strangely incongruous under his white surplice.

For the first time since her return, Claudia saw her brother-in-law, Victor Broom, as he stood beside the Vicar and red-faced Edgar Kennedy, who had recently been ordained. He looked strange in his surplice and black stole ; his hair was far too long, the breeze caught it and made it stand up untidily. Victor, on the other hand, looked so smooth, so well groomed, so smug, that she felt her dislike of him flare and blaze. Harriet was too ill to come ; but he was here, mouthing his words, using an artificial inflection which angered her. Edward Bower, standing a little apart from the other bearers in the little village church, leaning against a Norman pillar, watched the little scene. He noticed the sudden flush which spread over Claudia's face as she first saw Broom, and how she frowned suddenly, almost immediately turning to whisper to her mother, as if she tried to drive away thoughts which distressed her.

He saw Charlotte, crying a little under her heavy veil ; young Robert in his new, unfamiliar black clothes, the light catching his bright hair, watching the clergymen with a kind of nervous intensity as if he feared to allow his thoughts to wander for a moment. But it was Claudia who not only caught but held Edward's attention. Claudia who stood so erect, her trailing weeds making her appear taller than she was in reality, her white collar and cuffs, the narrow line of white which

edged her bonnet, giving a touch of severity to clothes which were perhaps almost too expensively elaborate. Her fine, clear-cut features were thrown into high relief by the intensity of her black draperies. She seemed to Edward to have something almost regal in her carriage, her head was held high as if she silently defied anyone to whisper that Thomas Marsden had not been worthy of all the respect which was being paid to him—paid by a concourse of people to whom he had long ceased to be anything but an object of derision.

Later, in the big shabby dining-room, she spoke to everyone. Men whispered that it was unusual, that the womenfolk always retired to some upper chamber and left the men to the care of some distant relative who attended to their wants. Charlotte had disappeared, but Claudia walked among them with her hand on young Robert's shoulder, thanking them for their kindness in attending her father's funeral. At luncheon she sat with Robert at the head of the table, and Veysey whispered to Harris that he had never seen a "bonnier pair" in his life.

"How old will she be?" Brown of West March asked, as they stood about after luncheon, sipping their port.

"Naay, not a day mower nor twenty," Harris told him.

"She's gotten a reit 'eadpiece on her, 'as that one," Brown said.

Veysey said: "She went away a long-legged filly. Look at her now, a beauty—a regular beauty."

"The boy's a handsome fellow," Edward remarked.

"Umph, handsome enough—but he'll never have the character of the girl. I'd put my money on her every time."

Claudia reached them, and said to Edward: "Oh, Edward, would you stay and hear the will read? Neither Robert nor I knows anything about these things. It would be pleasant to have you here."

Young Robert flushed with delight. How like Claudia to mention their names together! "Neither Robert nor I . . ." —as if they were the same age, possessed of the same degree of importance. What a marvel she was! His heart was suddenly very full, and he knew that he was nearer tears than he had been all day. Claudia felt his shoulder stiffen under her hand as he made a valiant attempt to restrain his emotion.

"Robert dear"—she stooped to speak to him—"would you run upstairs and see if Fernanda is all right?"

He turned and pushed his way through the crowd into the cooler air of the hall. Once or twice he swallowed hard, then clenched his hands as he noticed some fallen petals, dropped from the wreaths, lying on the stairs. He wished that someone would pick them up. He hated the thought of death. Not frightening exactly, but queer, ugly, dreadfully final. It was a relief to know that he had passed the room which had been his father's, and to enter the sunny nursery where the starched and dignified nurse sat with Fernanda.

She looked up as he entered. "Oh, Master Robert, you're finished luncheon, then. I thought that I heard people moving about."

He nodded. "Yes, just finished. Did they bring yours up all right, nurse?"

"Very nicely, thank you. Things are a little inclined to get disorganized at these sad times, but it was all very nice indeed. Mrs. Coster forgets nothing and no one, does she?"

"She doesn't forget much," he admitted. "She sent me up to know if 'Nanda was all right."

"She's as happy as a queen and as good as gold," nurse assured him; "but would you remind Mrs. Coster, Master Robert, that it's nearly two o'clock?"

Robert knew that his face flamed suddenly. He knew of course that 'Nanda had to be fed, and that she would probably burst into wild screams of rage in a few moments as she always did when she was hungry; but the recollection that she relied on Claudia for her food touched him profoundly. Claudia, who had arranged everything, who had managed everything, who was down there now, standing talking to a lot of rough old men, thanking them, attending to their wants. She would have to sit and listen while Haversley read the will, she would have to give orders to the servants regarding meals for the remainder of the day, and in addition—Claudia had other obligations. Everyone relied on her, Robert felt. He felt his mother did, and here was this golden-haired baby ready to voice her claims at any moment. Years later, Robert

Marsden looked back on that moment of realization as the birth of his devotion to his sister. He had always loved her, but with this sudden understanding came something stronger—a devotion which was only to falter once throughout their lives.

He returned to the overheated dining-room where Claudia stood talking to Edward Bower, and went quickly to her side. She did not turn, but stretched out her hand to him as if she had sensed rather than actually seen him come back.

"There, Edward ! Now you'll be prepared. I suppose that we've got to have him here ?"

"Well, as your sister can't be present, I suppose he comes in her place."

She nodded briskly. "Very well, but I don't want him to enter into any discussions with me. You know my unfortunate temper, Edward." Then, turning to Robert : "Was Fernanda all right ?"

"Lying kicking hard," Robert said. "Nurse asked me to tell you that it was nearly two o'clock."

"Oh, goodness, and I'd almost forgotten ! There, Robert, stay and look after these people. If anyone asks for me say that I'm busy and let them go."

Gradually the room began to clear. Stout farmers came and shook hands with him, told him to be a "good lad, and luke after thy muther, poor laady !" then departed to climb into high gigs and drive back to their homes. The air of the room was thick with the smell of food, heavy clothes, and hot bodies. Slowly the guests went their ways. Robert's hand felt bruised from the pressure of huge fists, and more than once he wanted to smile as broad red faces assumed an expression of suitable melancholy, harsh loud voices took on a new and artificial tone in keeping with the sentiments which they uttered.

"Ah mun get along, Robert lad. Gie my respects ter thy muther an' sister. Ah doot as it's bin a saddish daay fur all on ye." Or : "Good-bye, Bob ; Ah doot as Ah can't wait fur thy sister. Tell 'er as everything was splendidly done. Yer pore father couldn't 'ave axed nout better, choose 'ow."

He was left alone with old Veysey, Edward Bower, and Victor Broom, who arrived as the last of the farmers were leaving. Robert thought that he seemed nervous and constrained.

"How is Harrie?" Robert asked.

Broom shook his head. "Not as well as I could wish, poor dear! She's naturally upset, and feels that her only sister might have come to see her before this."

Veysey broke in with: "Naay, pore lass! I'd not think she had time for aught. Edward here tells me that she's arranged everything. She's nobbut bairn herself. Not so long since she lost her own husband, too. Must have been varry painful for her. Varry painful. Just give me another glass of that excellent port, Robert, will yer?"

Robert poured out the required port. There was something in having a sister whose father-in-law was the largest wine merchant in London. Claudia had sent to Town, and case after case had arrived. Robert had watched her unpack some of them, and had marvelled at her knowledge.

"Claudia said that you'd like this port, Mr. Veysey," he said.

Veysey guffawed. "I bet what she said was, 'Old Veysey 'ul get through more'n a mouthful of this port, unless he's sadly changed.' Now, isn't that right, Bob? Hello, here's Haversley. He gets down from that trap of his a good bit more stiffly nor what he did ten year ago."

Broom peered out at the upright, spare figure of the lawyer.

"You'd better go and tell your sister, Robert, that Mr. Haversley is here."

Robert knew that he flushed, and hated Broom for having caused him to demonstrate his youth. "She's busy at the moment," he said. "Engaged, that is."

"Just the same, I think you'd better ask her to come down," Broom persisted.

"Naay, Mr. Broom," Veysey said, dropping into broader Yorkshire than was usual. "Surely a married man like yersen knows what's keepin' 'er! She's been tending ter ivery one all t' daay, gie 'er a chance ter tend ter 'er own bairn!"

Victor Broom made a clicking noise of annoyance with his tongue, then walked away to the window, where he stood staring out. Robert could see that even the back of his neck was scarlet with confusion and annoyance. Lawyer Haversley entered, briskly sympathetic.

"Ah, Robert! Sorry I couldn't be at the funeral. Had to

go over to Leeds. Only just got back. Your mother quite well? That's right. Sad business for her. You've got Claudia home, eh? Poor girl, not long since she lost her husband, is it? Well, Mr. Veysey, how are you? Looking pretty well. Sir Edward, good day to you. Who's that by the window—oh, Mr. Broom! Good day to you. Hope your lady is better. Port, Robert? That sounds very nice."

"And tastes better than it sounds," Veysey told him.

"Thanks, Robert; sandwiches—good! I'm pretty sharp set, I can tell you." He sipped his port and nibbled his sandwiches with satisfaction.

Veysey said, as he tipped down the last drop of his port: "I'll be off. Robert, tell your sister that she's the finest lass I've seen for many a long day. My compliments to your mother, sympathy—er—condolences. Yer father was a good friend of mine, many a time we've—what's that, Edward? Oh yes—well, well, I'll get along. Good-bye, Robert; be a good boy to your mother and you'll never regret it. Mr. Haversley—Edward—Mr. Broom, sir—good day to you all."

Victor Broom returned to the little group by the fire. "You're not going to read the will in here, are you, Mr. Haversley?"

Robert said: "Claudia decided that we had better go into the library."

"Very well." His tone was stiff and formal. "Then, if your sister is ready—"

"Here she is," Edward Bower said. "Just in time, Claudia. Haversley wants to get to business."

Her entrance seemed to galvanize the little group into life again. Robert was sent to bring his mother down, a servant was rung for and ordered to carry decanters and biscuits into the library, Claudia shook hands with the lawyer and nodded to Victor Broom. He came forward holding out his hand.

"How are you, Claudia? I was so grieved to hear of your loss. We both grieved for you."

Claudia contrived to disregard the outstretched hand by turning to Edward Bower, asking him to give her a hand-bag which lay on a chair.

"Thank you." Whether the thanks were given to Broom or to Bower was uncertain.

"Was your husband ill long?" Broom asked. "We heard that he died in France."

"He was killed in a duel with an actor," she said briefly. "He left me several months before he was killed. Now, Mr. Haversley, if you're ready, I heard Robert come down with mama."

Edward offered her his arm. "My dear Edward, how delightfully formal!"

Broom stopped him as they entered the library. "Did you understand, Sir Edward? The will is going to be read."

"That's why Sir Edward is here," Claudia said, turning swiftly. "I asked him to stay."

Edward, confused and awkward, pulled out his cigar-case, then, as if recollecting the occasion, hastily pushed it back. Claudia said: "Smoke if you want to, Edward, that's all right. No one minds."

They sat down, Claudia next to her mother, her hand in Robert's, while Broom sat upright in one of the big, shabby arm-chairs. Edward Bower leant against the mantelpiece so that he could watch Claudia's face. The lawyer at the desk rustled papers.

"The will was made twelve years ago," he said. "Your husband, Mrs. Marsden, never made another. Everything is left to you." He paused, took off his glasses and polished them with elaborate care on a large silk handkerchief. He was evidently embarrassed.

"But twelve years ago," Claudia said, "surely there was a good deal to leave?"

"Exactly—quite an appreciable amount."

"And now—things have changed."

"Exactly, Mrs. Coster. Changed materially."

Claudia turned to her mother. "Is there any point in reading a will which has no real importance, mama?"

"I don't think so, my dear. As you say, it means nothing."

Edward said, "Except, Claudia, m'dear, that it's usual."

"So many stupid things are usual, aren't they?" she asked. Then turning back to the lawyer: "Is there any land?"

"Nothing except the gardens round Marlingly."

"And Marlingly?"

"That is free. I mean there was no mortgage raised on the house or gardens. I once remarked to your late father that such a mortgage might be possible, might even relieve him of some pressing embarrassments. That was no farther back than last year. He told me—I don't think that I am betraying a confidence—that it was impossible. He said there were reasons why he could not raise money on Marlingly."

"Then," Broom said, "the house is the property of Mrs. Marsden."

Charlotte, with a sudden nervous fluster, said: "But I don't want it. Let it go to pay debts on the estate—anything. I won't have it!"

Edward, watching Claudia intently, saw her turn to her mother as she might have turned to a fractious child; her expression was very gentle. She spoke with a sweet reasonableness which Edward found very touching.

"No, dearest, you shan't have it. You're going to live with grandmama in Tunbridge Wells. Don't worry—I promise you everything will be all right. Mr. Haversley, my father couldn't raise money on Marlingly because it didn't belong to him. He lost it over two years ago."

"Lost it?" Broom exclaimed. "What do you mean—lost it?"

"Lost it playing cards," she said calmly.

Broom turned to Edward. "Is that why you're here? Did he lose it to you?"

"No; I never played cards with Thomas Marsden in my life."

"Veysey? Was that why he was waiting so anxiously?"

Claudia's face broke into a smile. "Mr. Veysey was certainly not waiting to hear the will read," she said. "He was waiting to finish the port! No, my father lost Marlingly to me. It's mine!"

It was then that Victor Broom lost his temper. He had grown to like living in Yorkshire, his father had hinted more than once that he thought he wanted more experience before he stepped into the family living. "All very well to think of one's family; but, after all, Cuthbert is my cousin—decent shot, rides straight, appreciates a decent wine. No nonsense about him. Plenty of time; you're young yet, Victor.

Better stay where you are for a bit." Marlingly would have suited him very well. With a little money spent on it the place could be charming, and here was Claudia stating that she had won it gambling with her father.

She opened her bag and passed a sheet of paper over to the lawyer, who examined it gravely. His eyes twinkled as he looked at her.

"I don't know that this would stand, Mrs. Coster. It's a debt of honour, no doubt ; but—well, in a court of law—I don't know."

Robert, his blue eyes filled with admiration, said : "You keep it, Claudio ; I don't want it."

Charlotte blinked her eyes, shook her head as if she fancied that she was dreaming, then sighed. "I don't know why on earth you want it, my dear, but if you do—I certainly don't. How very naughty of you to gamble with poor papa ! Really, Claudio, I don't know what to say to you."

"If Robert and Mrs. Marsden agree to admit the debt," Edward said, "that surely settles the business. There's no more to be said."

"There is a good deal more to be said," Broom replied acidly. "My wife is the elder daughter, she has a right to consideration."

Claudia spoke to him directly. "If there is to be any question, then I shall ask Mr. Haversley to destroy the I O U, and the place goes to mama." She asked the lawyer, "Is that right, Mr. Haversley ?" He nodded. "Then mama and I can enter into what arrangements we wish. It's really nothing to worry about."

"Did you win anything else from your father?" Broom asked.

"No, there was nothing else I wanted. But I do think that it was pretty decent of papa not to raise money on the place after he lost it to me. Don't you, Edward ?"

"I do. I think, too, that it was pretty decent of you, Claudio. I congratulate you—you've saved Marlingly."

That evening—after Robert had returned to Crudlethorpe—when Claudia sat with her mother, their talk turned again to the old house.

"I don't know why you wanted it, Claudio," Charlotte said. "It's not even a very pretty place, and you could never

come and live here with that dear child—not for more than half the year, at all events. What would her grandparents say? I know what I should think, my dear—that you wanted to kill her."

"I shan't bring her yet," Claudia said reflectively. "I might never bring her, only I wanted it. I couldn't have let it go to strangers."

"Victor wanted it, I think."

"Well, what is Victor but a stranger?" Claudia snapped suddenly. "Oh, how I dislike that man"—she laughed—"and how heartily he dislikes me!"

The following day she walked over the fields to see her sister for the first time. Robert had asked if he should remain and come with her, thinking that he might act as a buffer between his sister and Broom. Claudia shook her head. "No, Robert, I'd rather go alone. I may have to say a good many unpleasant things—I might even lose my temper, and I don't particularly want you to witness that exhibition."

"Then don't lose it!" he suggested.

She gave him her quick, nervous, almost boyish grin, which looked so out of keeping with her widow's clothes and her air of maturity and confidence.

"I might not be able to keep it, young Robert. That's the answer. No, you go off to your works, and next time we meet it shall be in London."

Striding across the fields with her dog at her heels, she stopped for a moment by the stile where she had sat to listen to Francis Coster as he told her that he loved her. How grave they both had been! Yet, even now she believed that Francis had been serious, that he had meant what he said. That had been the trouble with Francis Coster, he had loved so many people, and his love for them all had lasted only for such a short time. She had been his widow three months. Scarcely more than a year ago she had believed him to be the most wonderful young man in the world. Now she looked back on her love for him, her life with him, his desertion of her, with no emotion except one of relief that it was all over, that it all lay behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

HARRIET BROOM lay on her sofa covered with a bright, striped silk rug which she and Victor had bought in Menaggio. The sight of her sister shocked Claudia profoundly. It was almost impossible to believe that this pale, drawn woman whose hair lay dull and lifeless on her forehead, whose voice had lost all tone except a certain fretful pathos, could be her sister Harriet with whom she had played and romped a few years before.

"You might have come before, Claudio!"

"Harrie darling, there has been so much to do. I made mama leave everything to me ; she's worn out. I shall be glad when she can get away to her beloved Tunbridge Wells."

Harriet's eyes filled with the sudden tears of weakness. "Oh, is she going ? No one told me. Victor came home with some queer story which he says will be all over the county tomorrow. Something about papa losing Marlingly to you, playing cards. Really, Claudio, it's rather dreadful."

Claudia laughed. "Not a bit dreadful, my dear. I knew papa, I knew that he might go back on everything—but never on a gambling debt. I wanted Marlingly kept safe, and I took the only means that offered. The result was that he never tried to raise money on it. Poor dear, I can imagine how often he longed to, and how often that funny little bit of conventional honour kept him from doing so. Rather nice, don't you think, Harrie ?"

"I think it's all dreadful," Harriet said fretfully. "Victor says that there was an enormous crowd of people there, and that everyone had too much to drink. He said that horrible old Veysey was quite intoxicated."

Claudia bit her lip, trying to control the reply which sprang to her mind. Victor, Victor, Victor ! Had she to sit and listen to his criticisms all the afternoon ?

"Oh, I don't know about an enormous crowd. They had

enough to drink. I made up my mind that everything should be done decently. Anyway, the cost of it all didn't come out of the estate, tell Victor. The food was paid for out of my own pocket, the wine came out of Coster's warehouses."

Harriet raised herself on her elbow. She looked at her sister's clothes with obvious interest, then said, "I suppose they're very rich?"

"Who? Oh, father and mother—yes, I suppose so. They seem to be."

"How funny to call them father and mother! Are they foreigners?"

"Spanish Jews."

"Jews! Claudio, how *awful*!"

"Don't be so silly and provincial! They're adorable people. They worship Fernanda, they're remarkably fond of me, and I love them both tremendously." Then quickly she went on to talk of her sister's illness. "Listen, Harrie. I want to take you to the South. 'Nanda is quite old enough to travel, the villa is lovely, and you'd get well in no time."

"Mr. Coster's villa? I don't think Victor would let me go, he'd worry so if I were away from him. Besides—I don't think that he'd allow me to stay with Jews in any case. You see, he is a clergyman, and he feels that we can never really forgive the Jews for the part they played—"

Claudia groaned. "Oh, let's leave Jews out of it. If they're good enough to be Prime Ministers of England, if they're good enough for the Prince of Wales, surely they're good enough for us! All I care about is that we should get you well and strong again. I can't bear to see you like this. I want the old Harriet back who used to skate and play tennis, who had such fun with us all."

It was rather like pounding a feather bed, Claudia felt. Harriet smiled at every suggestion, and then set it aside. She could not leave Victor, he would never allow it, he would be wretched without her. She had every care, every attention; Dr. Rawlinson came every other day.

"But Rawlinson is a country practitioner," Claudia objected. "Let's try London, Paris, Berlin—not Marbury."

Harriet shook her head. "Victor says that the English

doctors are the best in the world. He doesn't approve at all of this new experimentalism." She brought out the word with a certain air of pride.

Claudia knew that her patience was wearing thin, knew that she longed to tell her exactly what she thought of Victor Broom and his smug self-satisfaction. Then, as she looked at the face of her sister, that face which had changed so terribly during the past two years, her heart contracted and she made a violent effort to regain her control.

"All right, let it go at that," she said. "The only thing that really matters is to get you well, Harrie. Let's all concentrate on that, shall we?"

"We'll discuss things with Victor."

In desperation, Claudia asked, "Harrie, you do want to get better, don't you? You don't want to drag out your life as a semi-invalid, do you?"

"I want to do whatever Victor thinks best."

"It seems almost unfair to leave everything to Victor," Claudia said with sudden coldness. "His chief concern appears to be to give you as many children as possible."

"Oh, how terribly unkind! Victor told me yesterday that you had grown so hard. He said that you spoke of your own poor husband as you might have spoken of a stranger!"

"We'll leave Francis out of it!" Then with that sudden lapse into an almost boyish tone which was characteristic of her, Claudia came forward and took her sister's thin hand in both her own. "Look here, I don't want to lose my temper. You know what a fiendish temper I've got. You talk things over with Victor, and tomorrow I'll come over again. Tell him that the Villa Coster is waiting; it's modern, comfortable, gardens leading down to the sea—I have *carte blanche* to spend what I like. Think it over, Harrie, and let's *do* something."

She left the house congratulating herself that she had contrived to keep fairly calm. As she unhitched Vanity's lead from the gatepost she laughed.

"Just got away in time, my dear. It's the very devil to have a temper like mine. I ought to be marked 'Highly Inflammable' as a warning to everyone."

She swung open the wide white gate and found herself face to face with Victor Broom. He had become almost portly, and had grown a pair of small, excessively neat side-whiskers which made him look older than he really was. His manner was slightly reproachful yet conciliatory.

"Ah, I ought to say, 'Welcome, stranger!'" he said. "We've been looking for you for days. Harriet was a little hurt."

"I've had so much to do. Funerals make a lot of work."

"How do you find your dear sister?"

"I find her looking frightfully ill. I've never seen such a change in anyone." Then, altering her tone abruptly, she said, "Look here, Victor, walk with me so far, will you?"

"Gladly." Then, smiling, "No one will ever mistake you for anything but a Yorkshire woman, Claudie, as long as you use that idiom—'so far'—when you mean part of the way."

"That will be only a matter for congratulation to me," she said. "Now, Victor, what are you going to do about Harriet? She's ill, desperately ill. Something must be done."

His smile was tinged with patronage. "My dear Claudia, do you imagine that your sister is neglected? I can assure you that Dr. Rawlinson is most attentive and kindly. He comes every second day to visit her."

"Rawlinson!" Claudia exclaimed. "A little G.P. in a village!" Then, seeing his face deepen in colour, she tried once again to recapture her temper. "I want you to allow Harriet to come South with me. There's the villa, it's a heavenly place, there is everything she can want—"

He held up a plump, well-kept hand. "One moment, one moment." This villa—it belongs to your father-in-law, I imagine?"

"Yes: Ferdinand Coster."

"A Jew? I ascertained that some months ago, when Edward Bower was speaking of them. No, Claudia, I don't think that I could allow my dear wife to accept hospitality from Jews. I take it that they are not even converted to Christianity. Besides, remember that your sister has seen the finest specialist in England on—on female complaints."

Claudia halted suddenly, she stared at him, her eyes furious,

her cheeks blazing. "The finest specialist in England! Who gave an opinion which you immediately disregarded. What did he tell you? He warned you that Harrie must have no more children. How much effect did that have upon you? Which came first—his opinion or your own damned sensuality? Answer that!"

He breathed deeply, his nostrils dilated, his red lips parted, showing his firm white teeth. "If you speak to me again in that manner I shall leave you," he said. "I refuse to listen to you."

"You'll listen," Claudia said grimly. "You'll listen because you know me, and you know that if you attempt to walk away I am quite capable of following you, talking at the top of my voice for all Marlingly to hear. Harriet's dying—I know it, mama knows it, you know it. If Rawlinson isn't a complete old fool he knows it too. Death's written on her face already. I suggested taking her away; she replied that Victor would never allow her to leave him. I suggested other doctors—suggested everything I could think of. Her reply was always the same—Victor must be consulted, Victor would not like this, Victor would never approve of that. It might have done her good had I told her exactly what this all-powerful Victor really was!"

"Which is . . . ?"

"Shall I tell you? You want to know? By God, you shall know! You're a murderer, Victor Broom. A cold-blooded, selfish murderer. You—a clergyman, a teacher of God's word. You sneer at, disapprove of, Jews! It would be funny if it wasn't tragic. Blessed are the pure in heart. Have you ever examined your own? What has marriage meant to you? A gratification of your wretched passions, lusts, sensuality. Harriet's paying because you have never learnt self-control."

"I think that your own loss and the recent happenings at Marlingly have turned your brain," Broom cried, trying to steady his voice.

"You think nothing of the kind," she returned. "You know that for the first time in your life, a woman has dared to tell you the truth."

"Do you suppose that I shall ever allow you to enter my

doors again?" Broom stammered. "Do you think that I shall ever permit my wife to be contaminated by your foul insinuations? What do you know of the love of decent, God-fearing people? Nothing! I realized that when you spoke so lightly of your unfortunate husband. No wonder he left you! You were in your element yesterday with a crowd of half-intoxicated farmers, who were all ogling you, all whispering about you and your sudden disappearance and the reason for it. Any decent woman, after the funeral of her father, would have retired and remained with her child, her bereaved mother—not walked round the room holding a reception! Remember that if I find you in my house again, I shall have not the slightest compunction in throwing you out with my own hands!"

He almost spat the words at her in his fury. His face was clay-coloured, and Claudia noticed how flabby his cheeks had grown, how his whole figure appeared to have lost its youth and elasticity. He was shaking from head to foot, and when he held out his hands towards her she saw that they trembled as if he had an attack of ague.

She lifted her hands and caught him by the shoulders. She could feel the soft flesh quiver under her strong fingers, she realized her own strength and rejoiced in it. At that moment she felt that she could have killed him and taken pleasure in doing so.

"If Harriet wants me, sends for me," she said, shaking him to give point to her words, "I shall come, and neither you, the devil, nor the Almighty shall keep me away. If, poor soul, she's grown as flabby mentally as you have physically, then I can do nothing, and she must go her own way to death. That won't prevent you from being a murderer. That's on your soul, and nothing will ever rub it out. You sanctimonious, psalm-singing toad! Pah! Get away, get back to your house and your wife and see how much of this conversation you dare retail to her." She removed her hands from his shoulders, and for an instant he staggered a little as if his strength had deserted him. Then standing before her, white and distraught, he said almost pleadingly, "Claudia, this is terrible. Let me explain to you——"

"I've ordered you to go!" Claudia cried. "You heard me.

Do as I told you—get out of my sight for, by God, I've got sufficient strength to kill you!"

She left him, climbing over the stile, swearing under her breath at the voluminous draperies which encumbered her, and walked rapidly back to Marlingly. By the time she reached home some of the intensity of her anger had died ; she blamed herself that she had not been more conciliatory, and later was beset with sudden dreadful qualms that her passion might have been injurious to Fernanda. That night she sat down and wrote to her sister, wrote kindly and temperately, without any mention of the scene between herself and Broom. She promised to fall in with his arrangements, only begging that Harriet would allow her to share in an attempt to find health for her.

She was unwilling to trust the letter to a servant, and so held it back until Robert came home on the Saturday afternoon, when she asked him to take it over to Harriet. He returned an hour later, his handsome face clouded and angry.

"I've brought your letter back to you, Claudia," he said. "I gave it to Harriet, she read it, and then when Victor came in she handed it to him. He read it and asked Harriet if she gave him permission to speak for her. She cried a little, then said that he might. He spoke to me as if I'd been some groom ! 'Tell your sister,' he said—and you know that high-and-mighty voice of his, don't you ?—'tell your sister that I vowed before God to protect and care for Harriet, and with God's help I will carry out my solemn promise. I neither need nor desire her help.' Then he gave me the letter—there it is."

Claudia took the letter from him and stood twisting it in her strong fingers. She did not speak, and the expression on her face startled Robert. He had never seen her look so stern, so coldly angry. There was no sign of passionate resentment. He could have understood that, for he had known Claudia's passions and tempers all his life—knew how quickly they flared and how soon they died down, leaving her regretful and anxious to make amends. Watching her half fearfully, he found only a frozen hatred ; she did not seem to be the same person who had laughed with him only a few hours before, who had played

with 'Nanda and teased Vanity. Tentatively he stretched out his hand and laid it on hers.

"Claudia darling," he said gently, "don't look like that. You don't look like yourself."

She started as if he had awakened her from an ugly dream. "Sorry, Robert. I was only wondering whether I'd made matters worse by my infernal temper. I might have done better to have been gentle, admiring, even flattering to Victor. I couldn't do it. I'm not made that way. Anyhow, it's too late now. Poor Harriet—it's a pity!"

"I think," Robert ventured, "that she's really very happy with him."

"Is she? I wonder! Or is it all part of an elaborate game? Is she deceiving him or deceiving herself? I don't suppose that it matters very much which. Robert"—with sudden intensity—"promise me that when you marry, if you do, that you'll treat a woman decently. Don't treat her with less consideration than you'd show to a brood mare or a pedigree bitch. Don't lie to her or to yourself. Don't pretend to be such a weak fool that you can't learn a little self-control. Don't try to blame God for your own self-indulgence. Don't ticket all kinds of base things love, when in your heart you know that their right names are self-indulgence and sensuality." She stopped and smiled at him. "I wonder if you know what I'm talking about, Robbie?"

"Well, yes, I think so. I'm eighteen, y'know. One hears things. . . ."

She nodded. "I know—only generally one hears them so damned nastily, hears them whispered and sniggered over, gets to know them through a sort of fog of secrecy. If I were you, I shouldn't be in a hurry to rush into—intimate things; wait until you can do what you like cleanly, not all messily and furtively."

He remembered that he was eighteen, that he was living in rooms with another man, and that already his position in the works was one of some importance. "I don't believe that you'd like me to develop into a sort of molly-coddle, though, would you?" he said, swaggering a little.

She looked at him, frowning for a moment, then said coldly,

"If you ever came to me and talked boastingly about sowing your wild oats, and it being necessary for men to learn to know the nastiest and dirtiest side of life, if I ever found that you'd jeopardized your health and future because you were a weak-kneed fool, I think I'd thrash you with the first crop I could find. I say that, Robbie, and mean it, and I think I love you more than anything or anyone after Fernanda."

His face assumed an expression of astonishment. "I say, Claudio, you're letting fly, aren't you? I swear that I won't. You see, I do work very hard, and I share rooms with a fellow who works even harder than I do. If you think either of us would—well—mess about in Marbury or Crudlethorpe, you're mistaken. . . . No, honestly, you don't need to be afraid for me."

A week later Marlingly was closed. Mrs. Marsden departed for her mothers' comfortable house in Tunbridge Wells; Claudio had several interviews with Haversley, paid a good many outstanding bills, and prepared to depart for London. The night before she left, Edward Bower rode over and sat in the half-stripped drawing-room talking to her. His pleasant north-country voice was almost music to Claudio—it carried with it a sense of solidity, reliability, and honesty. Things which meant reality to her.

"I'll ride over and take a look at things now and then," Edward said. "If anything wants doing, I'll put it in hand. No sense in allowing a roof to leak, or gutters to get stopped up, eh? I'll act as a sort of steward for you."

"I should think that you'd always be a very 'just steward'."

"Nice of you to say that. I'm a dullish sort of chap, but I've always thought a lot of you. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you if you asked me."

As she watched his heavy, kindly face, she wondered vaguely what it would be like to marry Edward Bower. Dull, she decided. Safe but dull. How strange it was that nice men—men like Edward—were so dull, and butterflies like Francis were so attractive! It was a queer dispensation on the part of fate, almost unfair. Edward stared at her; his light eyes looked more like gooseberries than ever, his mouth sagged a little, and once he wiped his forehead with a brightly coloured

silk handkerchief. She felt a little apprehensive. Was he going to become sentimental?

At last he spoke. "You're going back to London?"

"To Portland Square, yes."

"I might come up fairly soon to talk over this new machine for bottling and capping. We might dine somewhere, eh?"

Claudia began to wish that he would go. His trick of saying "eh" at the end of every sentence irritated her. She had a great deal to do, and nurse was already a little flustered, complaining that the country maids were little or no help to her.

"Yes, I'd like to, Edward."

He stood up, squaring his broad shoulders. "I'm keeping you. I'll be getting along. I only want to say this—if ever you are worried or unhappy, remember that I'm there to do what I can. I'm not a very amusing chap, I don't know a thing about music or pictures. I'm making money, and I've plenty of ideas about machinery. Believe me, it's machinery that's going to run the world before long."

"Is it?" She put the question with more interest than she had previously shown. If Edward spoke the truth, then she had chosen the best profession for Robert.

Edward nodded. "Is it? By George, it is! Well, the upshot of all this is, that—and don't think I want an answer now, Claudia; I don't—you like the north, you understand the people, and if one day you'd like to come back here as Lady Bower—well, I'm waiting." In a sudden agony of shyness and confusion he plunged for his hat, then offered her his hand, saying, "Good-bye, Claudia love, and take care of yourself." Then without another word he bolted from the room like a startled rabbit, leaving Claudia uncertain whether to laugh or cry.

Portland Square seemed very dignified, very large, very luxurious after Marlingly. Nurse made no attempt to conceal her satisfaction that she was back in her own spacious nurseries, with a maid to wait upon her who did not speak a dialect which was almost a foreign language. The old people welcomed Claudia as if she had been away for years. Mrs. Coster cried a little; the old man held her hands in his, saying softly: "Ah,

your lesser-known stuff. We ought to get out a 'Jubilee list'."

He blinked his eyes as if to reassure himself that Claudia really stood there before him, that this young woman in her black-and-white striped silk dress, with its trim bodice and the fashionable bustle, was not a figment of his imagination. Then he held out his hand ; she took it and he drew her closer to his side.

"First you were my daughter-in-law, then my daughter, and now you are to be my trustet partner, Claudia Coster. Only, remember, I am a hard taskmaster. For myself I reserve the right to work less hard than I once did; for you—I shall not find excuses." He laughed. "Sit down if you please, Claudia Coster, and let us talk real business. I suggest a salary and a percentage of the profits—small at first, and rising after each year if the partnership proves satisfactory. If not, then we terminate it at the end of twelve months. Now—get me a pencil and paper, please. I will give you—roughly—my idea of what you are worth to me." As she handed the paper to him, he looked at her, his face serious again. "I said I would give you an idea of what you are worth to me. I can only do that with regard to the business. To me—in my life—I could never tell you what you were worth, it would be impossible to put a value on you—I might say 'everything in the world' and still have underestimated you."

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAUDIA plunged into her work, determined that she would make a success. Here was her opportunity to gain independence, here was the way that might ultimately lead to Marlingly and the country which she loved, here was a career—something which should set her free of those restrictions which hampered so many women who were unable to enter the labour market and were forced to lead lives which never took them outside their household activities.

She rose early, took her breakfast with Fernanda in the nursery, went downstairs to interview the cook and arrange for the daily meals ; she spoke to Harper concerning the wines, and arrangements regarding possible guests, then, in the little office at the back of the house, she interviewed Gregson the coachman, and signed his lists for the stable requirements. By ten o'clock she was at the office, dictating letters, meeting the heads of departments ; later she made a complete tour of the cellars, the yards, the bottling- and dispatching-rooms. That done, she waited on Ferdinand Coster in his own room, gave him her report and took down his orders, suggestions, and advice. At half past twelve she drove back with him to Portland Square, lunched with him and his wife, visited Fernanda, and if the day were fine drove with the child and her nurse round Hyde Park before returning to the office. She never got home again until six o'clock, usually tired, longing for a hot bath and clothes which did not seem to have the slight smell of wines hanging about them.

Her mother had been a little shocked, she had written protesting that it seemed a little foolish for Claudia to spend her life "among bottles" when it was evident that the Costers were only too willing for her to enjoy a life of ease and comfort.

I should like to see you happily married, my dearest Claudia [Charlotte wrote], and it seems a very improbable thing that any man will come and look for you in a cellar !

Robert regarded it as a huge joke, and when he came up to Town on a visit used "Coster's Cellars" as an outlet for his rather youthful wit. It was not until he had visited the warehouse with his sister that he realized what an immense and successful concern it was. "Why, even corks are a study in themselves," he told Edward Bower when he returned to Yorkshire. "Do you know they pay as much as threepence for a good cork? You should see their stock-book—it's like a family Bible ; and when Claudia talks about '34 sherry, or '54 port, she gets positively lyrical. There's more in it all than meets the eye, I can tell you."

Slowly Charlotte became reconciled to the idea of her daughter being in business—in fact, she grew to regard the fact as something of a distinction, and even referred to it as "Claudia's hobby. Wine—you know. Most interesting. Oh, extraordinary, I admit ; but then, she has always been an astonishing person. Of course, Coster's is the biggest concern of its kind in England, and"—dropping her voice a little—"I can assure you that Claudia *is* Coster's."

Only from Harriet did Claudia hear nothing. Her letters were returned to her unopened, and when she sent presents to her sister they followed the same fate. Robert wrote that Harriet appeared to make little or no progress, that Victor would not allow Claudia's name to be mentioned, and that even old Rawlinson shook his head over Harriet's condition.

At the end of September, Ferdinand transported the family to the South of France as was his custom. The old lady was growing very frail, despite her huge bulk ; she breathed with difficulty in the foggy London air, and longed for sunshine and warmth. Claudia remained in London until the beginning of November, when she completed her plans for the Jubilee. They had imported a mellow golden wine from Portugal, a fine sherry of 1870, two types of Italian wine which she believed in, if only they would travel without the addition of too much alcohol—a fine, faintly sweet Toblino, and a Soave produced in the

vineyards near Verona. She had even hinted in her circulars that, for the celebrations planned for the Jubilee of one illustrious Widow, nothing could be more suitable than the productions of the house founded by another, Madame Clicquot, whose portrait, with side curls, lace cap, and an expression of slightly amused detachment, decorated Ferdinand Coster's private office.

She left for the South of France early in November, conscious that she had not only worked hard but worked well. Everything was ready for the rush which they expected next year. Orders had been given, arranged for, set aside ; true, there would inevitably be last-moment demands, but the stock was there, they could be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

She stayed twenty-four hours in Paris, where she dined with Pinto and his wife, admired the children, and petted the fantastically trimmed poodle. They were charming people, and she decided that Coster's was fortunate in possessing a French agent who was not only intelligent but well bred and obviously filled with enthusiasm for his work. True, she found the fashion in which the children were dressed slightly ridiculous—the girl far too elaborately clothed, with frills and flounces, so different from Fernanda's simple frocks ; the boy with his cropped dark head, his incorrect sailor-suits, kid gloves, boots and walking-stick.

“Why do you wear a sailor-suit ?” she asked him. “Do you want to be a sailor ?”

He listened gravely, and Claudia wondered if he were trying to make sense of her slow and probably incorrect French.

“No, madame,” he said, “I have no wish to be a sailor. I wear this in order to give pleasure to my mama.”

She laughed. “You talk like a little man.”

Watching him, so young, and yet moving with such dignity and speaking so gravely, she wondered what it might have been like to have had a son. To have worked for him, made a place in the world ready for him. Here she was merely using Coster's as a means to an end. She had no intention of working there all her life. Coster's would go, fall into other hands, and become absorbed in some vast organization. She sighed. A

boy might have carried it on, might have expanded it, possibly bought land and produced his own wine.

She found Fernanda more fascinating than she had imagined possible. At thirteen months she was a beautiful child, with her mother's vivid colouring, intelligent, healthy, and affectionate. Already she had character and decided views as to what she liked and disliked. Claudia was utterly content to be with her again, and for a month the thoughts of wine, price-lists, shipping orders, casks and bottles were pushed into the background. As she walked with her child, or accompanied the perambulator when nurse took Fernanda for her daily airing, people turned to look at the tall young English-woman who carried herself so erect, who laughed and talked to the baby, and who was followed by the ugly mongrel dog on which she seemed to lavish so much affection.

In the early days of December, Charlotte Marsden wrote that Harriet had become worse, and that they feared she might not rally. Claudia sat with the letter in her hand, trying to decide what course she should pursue. She knew that to travel to Yorkshire, to present herself at the house, was to risk a rebuff which might distress and possibly injure her sister. To write to Victor Broom begging that she might be allowed to come and see her might produce a reply, or it might be disregarded as so many of her letters had been. She had no sense of personal pride in the matter. Her affection for her sister was great, for, like so many north-country folk, blood-ties mattered supremely to Claudia Coster. She was ready to eat humble-pie, ready to beg Victor to allow her to see Harriet. She disliked him, distrusted him ; but Harriet's happiness came first, and she sat down and wrote to both Harriet and him, letters which at first sight it would have seemed impossible could have been penned by Claudia.

Mama tells me that Harrie is worse . . . let us forget our differences . . . she is my only sister . . . our love for each other . . . I will promise to conform to your wishes in every way . . .

To Harriet she wrote in the same strain.

If you are ill, very ill, let me come and see you. I will come immediately, travel day and night to reach you quickly. I promise not to annoy Victor in any way ; indeed, for your sake, I regret many things that I said to you regarding him. I am only waiting to come ; if you want me, nothing shall keep me away.

Days passed, Claudia scanned her letters anxiously ; no word came from Yorkshire, until a telegram announced :

*Harriet passed away on Monday. I go north today.
Mother.*

“And today means yesterday,” Claudia said. “This was sent off from Tunbridge on Tuesday, today is Wednesday. Even poor mama wasn’t sent for until it was too late for her to see Harrie. Why—why—why ? Didn’t Harrie want us ? Had we ceased to mean anything to her ? It’s impossible !”

Later, letters brought explanations. Harriet had been taken worse, Victor had written, the letter was actually in the post when Mrs. Marsden received the telegram stating that her daughter was dead.

Terribly sudden, Claudia dear. Poor Victor is frantic with grief. I feel sometimes that we have all been just a little hard on him. I believe that he loved poor Harriet devotedly.

“‘We have been just a little hard’,” Claudia decided, with twisted lips, ‘means that I, Claudia, have been unkind and unfeeling !’

Some of the warmth seemed to have gone from the sunshine, the flowers were less brilliant, the sea had lost much of its colour. She was miserable, knew that her mind turned again and again to the days when she and Harriet had been children together. She recalled scenes in the old shabby nursery, remembered how graceful Harriet had looked as she skated, danced, played rather ineffective tennis or croquet. They had been so fond of each other, they had confided their secrets to each other, made plans, and shared their small wardrobe. Again and again, Claudia wondered why Harriet had not sent

for her, why after that last letter she could not have insisted that Victor should write permitting her to go north. It was inexplicable. She sighed. Perhaps Harriet had not sufficient strength to insist. Her face hardened, as she wondered if Victor had refused to listen to her sister's pleading. The old hatred for him blazed again, and her mouth set into that hard line which the men at Coster's had grown to learn meant trouble for someone.

"I told him that neither he, the devil, nor the Almighty should keep me from her if she wanted me," Claudia said softly. "I begin to think that the devil and Victor Broom are one and the same person."

She went back to London early in January and flung herself into work again. There was plenty to do, much to arrange, and Claudia was glad of it. She always feared that if she allowed herself to dwell too much upon this man whom she disliked and distrusted, she might come to find her feelings an obsession.

She gave orders for Portland Square to be repainted, sent for decorators to make suggestions as to a more modern scheme of interior painting and papering. She insisted that at Coster's, cellars must be whitewashed and the building overhauled, and finally arranged for estimates for the installation of electric light.

"Only remember," she told the electricians, "I want to have it done without it upsetting the business. Work when you like, only don't interfere with my own men who are doing their daily work. Coster's must go on, no matter what new lighting system is being put in."

"Bound to be a certain amount of mess, madam, it's unavoidable," the foreman told her. "Wires, fittings, and all the rest of it have got to be put somewhere."

"I don't care where, so long as they're not in my men's way."

Isidore Pinto came over, she gave him orders for more wine—for port, sherry, champagne, brandy.

"Difficult, Mrs. Coster," he objected. "Neither '85 nor '86 were much good for champagne."

"Get what you can of '84, then, and speculate on this year's wines. I want a Jubilee-year stock laid in. I'm banking on the sentimentality of buyers. 'This was laid down', or 'this

was bought', 'Coster's stocked this'—in the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee."

Ferdinand returned, complained that she was too thin, that she must go about more and not turn herself into a machine.

"I'm very well," she said—"and talking about machines, I've had Edward Bower up to see me. He's got this bottling-machine ready. I've bought one."

Coster shook his head. "I don't trust 'em, Claudia. These machines. They waste stuff. Better stick to the old methods."

"What, with casks of Italian wine waiting to be bottled? My dear, I don't believe that it will keep. I want it bottled and off our hands. It's quick-trade wine, that new stuff we've bought. No, Edward will send someone to set it up; if it won't work, then his men must stick to it until it does."

The machine was delivered. Claudia looked at it, listened to Ferris, their engineer, explaining its merits, nodded, and ordered them to get it set up as quickly as possible.

"You understand it, Ferris?" she asked.

Ferris, a little sharp-featured Cockney, grinned. "That's all right, Mrs. Coster. I spent larst week-end up at Crudle-thorpe, listened to Thompson lecturing an' Sir Edward lecturing; if I don't understand it by this time, I oughter."

Two days later Ferdinand sent for her, asking that she would come to his sitting-room. She found him with his foot swathed in bandages, resting on a gout-stool. His face looked more yellow than usual, and from time to time his face twisted with pain.

"Oh, poor father, that wretched gout again! My dear, if only you didn't appreciate your own good wine, and your cook's excellent cooking, so well!"

Coster rolled his bloodshot eyes and twisted his face, as a sudden twinge caught the swathed foot. "Claudia, don't make fun. If you knew what I suffer—and now other worries come too."

"Tell me about them," she said. "That's what you keep a partner for."

He wiped his face, puffing out his lips. "Oof! That was a bad one. Listen, then, Claudia. This new worry is the fault

of your friend with the goggle eyes—your big Yorkshire Bower, and his new machinery.”

“The bottling-machine?”

“Bottling-machine!” Coster exclaimed. “Not only was it to bottle, it was to cork and cap, it was to do everysing except sell the wine to customers, and I don’t doubt that next time the big fool comes to London he will have made a machine which will grow grapes, press them, and everysing else. The great, heavy-footed—”

“If you get so excited,” Claudia said calmly, “I shan’t listen to you. You know that excitement sends your temperature up. And you’re not to speak so of Edward. He’s my very good friend.”

Coster stared at her intently, frowning. “Are you going to marry him?”

“Of course not. Marry Edward! My dear, be sensible.”

“He wants to marry you,” Coster said; his tone was suspicious.

“Of course he does. Has he ever made any bones about it? The only thing is that I don’t want to marry him. Or anyone else. What is the matter with you this morning? Don’t you know that I’m quite happy here with you, mother, and ‘Nanda? Now be reasonable and tell me what is wrong with Edward’s machine.”

His anger rose again. “Edward’s machine!” he mimicked. “It does nossing that it promised to do. Here is the message which Wilson has sent to me this morning. Gallons and gallons of fine Chianti, pints of superb Volnay, bucketfuls of excellent claret are washing about the floor of the bottling-house, all owing to this devil of a machine. For two days Ferris has worked at it, then we telegraph to Bower, and what does Bower do, tell me? He sends last night a child, a baby, just a little boy to set it right. Claudia, picture to yourself this disaster!”

She picked up her bag and gloves. “I’ll go down and see to it. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there yesterday. I went to Marchbank’s sale. However, don’t allow your imagination to run away with you, darling. They’d not be bottling Chianti, Volnay, and claret all at the same time. You can safely reduce

the gallons to gills, the pints to teaspoonsful, the bucketfuls to coffee-cups, and still be making a generous estimate. I'll go down and see to it."

"Yes, yes, go down, Claudio. Say whatever you wish. Tell them that I will not pay for this infernal machine, kick this child back to Yorkshire, play the devil with Bower's. I can rely on you?"

"To generally play the devil with everyone? Certainly." She drove down to the warehouse, which lay on the Surrey side of the river, noticing the hurry and bustle with appreciation. Claudio loved crowds and towns as much for herself as she disliked them for Fernanda. "Until I can leave towns behind me for good," she often said, "then give me one that is really a town, not a make-believe. One day I shall have finished with hurry and bustle, noise and traffic; until then—London is the best place I know, except Marlingly."

The carriage drew up outside the big gates on which the name of the firm was painted in huge white letters. The footman jumped down from the box to ring the bell which communicated with the porter's lodge. "A year ago," Claudio mused, "I should have dashed down and rung that bell myself. Now I've learnt to conserve my energy."

Inside the big paved yard, she sniffed the air in the fashion which was habitual to her when she entered a fresh atmosphere. Ferdinand Coster always said that she was like a dog, and she always assured him that she must be very near to the animal kingdom because her sense of smell was so acute. The air was filled with the scent of wine, of spirits, of straw and packing-cases, and Claudio detected the smell of tarred rope. Huge casks bearing the name of Italian exporters stood against the wall, boxes which had held wine-bottles from France and Spain were piled high, and in a corner was a group of wicker-cased demijohns. She stopped to glance at the labels of two small barrels, then, lifting her long skirts and holding them high to avoid contact with the damp stones, she made her way to the manager's office. The clerk rose to greet her.

"Good morning, Harrow. Mr. Wilson here?"

"Still watching them working on the new machine, Mrs. Coster."

"It's still giving trouble?"

"I'm afraid so. Shall I fetch Mr. Wilson?"

"No, I'll go through."

In the big bottling-room she found a little group of men gathered round the machine of which Edward Bower had prophesied such great things. There was Wilson, small, stocky, and sandy-haired, his hands in his pockets, staring gloomily at the silent machine. Near him was Catley, the outside manager, stout and red-faced, and wearing a suit of disgracefully old overalls. Ferris, her own engineer. Claudia fancied that she detected a slight air of satisfaction in Ferris's attitude. He disliked innovations, and had predicted the failure of the machine from the start. Half buried in the machine there was another man, also in engineer's overalls. As she reached the group the young man said, without looking up, "Someone turn that lever over!" Ferris moved forward, manipulated the lever, and waited. The young man tilted his head and listened. "Back again," he ordered; then, as no sign of movement came from the mass of pipes, wheels, springs, and levers, he straightened himself, saying, "Nay, that's no use. Let's try the other side."

Claudia walked to where Wilson stood. "Not found the damage yet, Mr. Wilson?"

"'Fraid not, Mrs. Coster. This young man's been tinkering about with her since he got here just after eight."

"No result?"

"None, except damage to our tempers, I'm afraid."

"I see." She nodded to the other men. "Good morning, Mr. Catley. Morning, Ferris. Well, Ferris, what do you make of it?"

"Sime as what I said before, said all along, Mrs. Coster—it's too fancified for us. I like suthing simpler, not so many wheels and springs. To tell you the trewth, we'd do better with our old wai of bottling. These new machines is more bother nor what they're worth."

Claudia stepped forward and spoke to the young man who was still peering into the intestines of the machine.

"Can't you discover the fault?" she asked crisply.

"Just a minute." The voice came muffled from the depths

of the bottling-machine. "There, that ought to do it. Throw over that lever again." He listened again with almost painful attention, but no sound reached his ears. "Damn the thing!" he muttered fervently.

Claudia tapped with her foot on the paved floor.

"Don't they teach you civility at Bower's?" she demanded.

This time the young man rose and faced her. He was as tall as she, his hair was in wild disorder, his face was filthy. He rubbed his hands on a lump of cotton waste.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I was concentrating on that far-side cog-wheel; I thought that it might not be running quite true."

"How long have you been tinkering with this machine?" Claudia asked.

"Since eight this morning. Don't worry, madam, I'll get it right before I've finished, believe me."

"Meanwhile the whole of our bottling is held up!"

"I'm afraid so; unless you could couple up the old plant temporarily."

She flushed with annoyance. "What the devil do you suppose we buy new machines for? Certainly not to keep as ornaments while we use old plant. This—this mess here"—she pointed to the machine—"is guaranteed by your firm to bottle, cork and cap. Very well—why doesn't it do these things?"

For a brief second his eyebrows were raised, then his firm jaw protruded, and he said coldly: "Because, madam, there has been some fault in the setting-up of the machine."

"I see. That's illuminating. Who set this machine up?"

Ferris stepped forward. "I did, Mrs. Coster, according to the instructions given to me at Bower's works."

"Is the base level?"

"It was when I tested it, prior to setting up the machine, Mrs. Coster."

"Has it shifted?"

"I don't think so." He turned and shouted to one of the boys who was passing, "Hi, you, fetch a spirit-level from my office! Look sharp, now!"

The young man from Bower's said, with marked patience,

patience which was slightly overdone: "I've tested it. It's true enough."

"Then will you kindly tell me—briefly—what is wrong with the damned thing, and not waste any more time?" Claudia asked.

"Certainly, madam. The moment that I know myself, you shall be told." He turned to one of the workmen. "Give me that copper-headed hammer and the American wrench. No, the smaller one."

At that moment Claudia Coster could cheerfully have boxed his ears. She was not accustomed to be disregarded, particularly in the warehouse. There, her word was law; there she gave orders and expected them to be obeyed without either hesitation or question. Yet here was this young engineer, in his greasy overalls, with tousled hair, his face and hands filthy, calmly disregarding her in front of her own workmen. She stepped forward and tapped him smartly on the shoulder. He lifted his head and turned to face her.

"As you have wasted three or four hours," she said, "another five minutes is neither here nor there. Just listen to me for a moment, will you?"

"Certainly, madam."

"If this machine isn't running, and running properly, in twenty minutes, you can take it down and take the damned thing back to Bower's. I don't pay for machines that don't do what you contract that they will do. In addition, will you please tell me why Bower's have sent you down here instead of Thompson? Any other machinery we've had from them has always been eminently satisfactory, and Thompson always set it up and tested it. I believed that he was still Sir Edward's head mechanic."

She thought that the young man was going to smile, his lips quivered for a second, then set once more into their firm line.

"Thompson is still Sir Edward's head mechanic," he said. "I happen to be his head designer. Anyway, as I invented this machine, he thought that I had better come down and see to it. Now, madam, I'm not used to women bothering me when I'm at work, we don't go in for luxuries of that kind at Bower's."

If you'll kindly let me get on with my job, the sooner it 'ul be finished. You're only wasting your time and mine as well."

Wilson, clearing his throat, said impressively: "Now, now, young fellow, that won't do, y'know. You're talking to Mrs. Coster. We don't want any impertinence, even if you did invent the machine."

Claudia flung round at him, her face flaming. "That will do, Mr. Wilson!" she snapped. "When I need your help or interference I'll tell you. Until then I'm quite capable of looking after myself. Now, then—twenty minutes, and if it's not running sweetly by that time, pack it up and take the confounded thing home again. I shall be in my office. Let me know when this machine is running—if it *does* run before the twenty minutes are up."

She turned and walked away, with Wilson at her heels. The young man rested his grimy hands on his hips and laughed quietly.

"Well, well! So that's the famous Mrs. Francis Coster, is it? Like having a thunderstorm about the place! Now, come on, Ferris, I want this thing running in five minutes. Let's get down to it!"

CHAPTER SIX

ONCE again he plunged into the machine ; this time he swore less softly ; and suddenly gave vent to a long whistle of surprise.

"Here, Ferris," he said, "I want to show you something. See that little nut on the end of that far bolt ? No, of course you don't because it's not there. Where is it ? Lost, or what ?"

Ferris peered over his shoulder into the machine.

"Gawd !" he ejaculated. "I fergot it, I s'pose. Strike me pink, thet's a smack in the eye proper ! Hell, what will she sai about that ! I shan't 'arf cop it from the missus."

"Where is the nut—or another the same size ?"

Ferris sped away, his face damp with the sweat of anxiety. The young man stood by the machine, running his hand over the smooth steel, mechanically testing the firmness of a screw here or a bolt there.

"I knew that you were all right, my beauty," he said softly. "Damn' fool who calls himself an engineer. Engineer—be damned ! Silly fool !"

Ferris returned and held out a handful of nuts. The Yorkshireman looked through them, his face grim.

"One would have been enough," he said. "Now, watch, and I'll give you a lesson in engineering. See that—very well, unless that is kept firm you lose grip and, in this case, grip means driving-power. Without driving-power you won't get results—except from your boss's tempers." His strong fingers twisted the nut home. "I take it that the machine ran sweetly enough for an hour or so after you got her going ? She did. Then this bolt worked loose. Now go and tell Wilson that we're ready."

Ferris hesitated, then, stammering a little, said, "I sai—I mean, I s'pose you'd not be sport enough ter keep yer mouf

shut as to why the ruddy thing didn't work? S'ardly to be egspected, I know that, ondly it 'ud mike a 'ell of a difference ter me if yer could."

The other grinned. "Go on, you don't suppose that I want to make a long story out of it, do you? I don't depend on Mrs. Coster for my job, and so her tempers and swearing won't break my back. I shan't say anything."

Ferris sped away, and a moment later Claudia was back at the machine.

"You've got her running?"

"Just going to start her, madam. Connect up the feed-pipe with that big cask there, will you, and slip a dozen bottles into the carrier. That's right, Ferris. Let's see that the caps and corks are ready—"

Claudia held up her hand. "One minute, if you please. I don't want my Chianti all over the floor. Couple up with the water-tap first. We've had enough waste of wine and time already."

"There won't be any waste, madam, I promise that. Ferris, throw over that lever."

The cogs engaged, the wheels began to turn, the little pistons moved smoothly and noiselessly, and the cradle in which the bottles were stacked slid round easily and without vibration.

Claudia listened to the regular percussions, watched the holders descend, drive the corks home; saw the caps come down, and noticed how the grips tightened and twisted, liberating the bottles to slide gently into the waiting slots. The young man scrutinized the machine, once he moved forward with an oil-can and very delicately dropped a little thin, yellow fluid on one of the cogs. Then, nodding again to Ferris, he said: "Throw back the lever. She's running all right now, you'll have no further trouble. Keep the belt there fairly slack, no tighter than it is now. Don't over-oil her either, and use thin oil when you do need to oil." He lifted one of the bottles out of the holder and carried it to Claudia.

"There, madam. Fitted exactly, the cork driven right in, and the cap fitted quite neatly. You see, the machine does all that Sir Edward claimed for it."

She took the bottle from him and examined it carefully, half wishing that she might have been able to find some fault

and yet conscious that she experienced a certain satisfaction that Bower's, a Yorkshire firm, had made good all they had promised.

"It looks all right," she said.

This time the young man smiled outright. "It *is* all right, madam."

"I congratulate you." Then, with a smile as frank as his own, she said: "Come into my office and we'll drink good luck to Bower's and their designer."

He bowed, wiping his hands on the cotton waste, then throwing it into a box near the machine.

"That's very kind of you. If you'd give me a minute to get out of these filthy overalls and wash my hands, I'll be delighted. Only I don't drink very much. I'm afraid that it's rather wasted on me."

"Clicquot's never wasted on anyone," Claudia replied. "If you don't like it as drink, look on it as food."

In her own office, with its thick carpet, handsome mahogany furniture, small, bright fire, and huge desk, she busied herself setting out fine old glasses and a barrel of dry biscuits. Ringing for Harrow, she ordered him to bring "a bottle of—let me see—one-seven-five, tell Jones. Not from the C bin, from the A".

A moment later the young north-countryman entered. He looked very different in his neat blue suit, with a blue-and-white spotted tie, his warm, yellow hair brushed, his face devoid of grease and dirt. Claudia saw that his skin was very clear, with a fresh colour, as if he spent a good deal of his time out of doors. She saw too that his hands, although stained with grease and oil, were well shaped and carefully kept. He held his head high, and, though he was scarcely handsome, there was an air of frankness about him. His eyes met hers squarely, and she detected in them an amused twinkle.

She held out her hand.

"I've got to apologize," she said. "I behaved very badly."

"Nay," he said, holding her hand in his. "I don't know that I was over-polite myself."

She poured out the wine, pushed a glass towards him, then said:

"Could you possibly explain to a woman—one of those luxuries which you don't indulge in at Bower's—just what was wrong? You see, the senior partner, Mr. Coster, is bound to ask me."

"Well, it's this way"—he spoke almost confidentially—"I can't very well explain. It was a technical error, a mechanical thing. I'm afraid that's not much help to you, is it?"

"No help at all. Tell me—can I blame Bower's for the breakdown?"

This time he laughed outright. "That's what's called diplomacy, eh? Then, unless you want to be mightily unjust, no—you can't throw the blame on us, Mrs. Coster. There, will that do?"

"Admirably. That's all I wished to know. Now, drink this toast, Mr.— What is your name, by the way?"

"Betterton—David Betterton," he said.

"You're very young to be a designer for Bower's. My brother is there, you know—Robert Marsden."

He nodded. "Ay, Robert and I share the same rooms. Robert's clever; he'll go a long way. That's the best of working for Edward Bower, he wants to push you along, not keep you back, like so many masters do."

Claudia pulled out a chair and sat down, her elbows on the desk.

"Oh, this is interesting! But you're older than Robert."

"Five years. I'm twenty-four this next month. I've heard a great deal about you, Mrs. Coster. Robert's never tired of telling me about you."

"What does he tell you? That I've the worst temper in the three Ridings?"

"He says—" Betterton began, then stopped abruptly. "There, I don't think I can tell you, except that he's very fond of you."

"He left you to find out about the temper for yourself?" She laughed; then added more gravely, "By Jove, I'm afraid I was dreadfully offensive!"

"I wasn't too polite myself," he said. "If you'd been a man I'd probably have been a lot more offensive than I was."

"You make me feel that I took a mean advantage, that I hid behind my sex."

"I don't think you or anyone else can help that," he said, speaking slowly, as if he considered the question. "I don't think that men will ever be able to treat women—in business—as they'd treat other men. Anyway, I know I hope that I shan't."

Claudia sat pinching her lower lip between her finger and thumb, as she so often did when she was thinking deeply. Her flare of temper had left her, she had that generous capacity for forgetting grievances which made her able to offer an apology, sincerely and honestly, and put former arguments or disturbances behind her. To Claudia an apology meant something final, something which definitely ended any former unpleasantness. She gave them as she accepted them, without reservation. Therefore, she found herself as capable of talking to this young man in an informal and friendly way, as half an hour previously her anger had made her treat him as an inefficient servant.

"I don't quite like that," she said. "I can't see why we couldn't come into the labour market on the same footing as men, working as men work—with the exception of certain forms of heavy manual labour, of course."

"Ah, there you go!" David cried. "You begin with making an exception. You bar heavy work, and once you begin to make one exception—others are certain to follow."

"But certain trades are barred to men—dressmaking—"

"Worth!" he challenged.

"Motherhood!" she countered. "No, that's scarcely fair. I don't believe that there need be any exceptions if you put on one side the very heaviest kind of physical work; and if Sir Edward is right, in the near future that's going to be done by machinery. There's a kind of stupid old shibboleth that women can't do this and can't do that. My mother was horrified when I came into this business."

"I doubt if many women could organize a business like Coster's."

"Rubbish! You'll assure me that I'm an exception in a minute."

He laughed. "Well—and if I did. You are an exception, aren't you?"

"Me! I'm sufficiently ordinary."

"If it pleases you to believe that, there's no harm done," he said. "But I doubt that you'll not get many people to agree with you." He glanced at the clock on the high marble mantelpiece. "I must be getting along, I've a dozen things to see to before my train goes at five-twenty from King's Cross. Good-bye, Mrs. Coster, and thank you for the wine."

He gave his stiff, rather formal, little bow. Claudia laughed and held out her hand.

"Nay, we're both from Yorkshire!" she cried. "You are a Yorkshireman, aren't you? I thought so. You must shake hands or I shall think you're still resenting my rudeness."

"I've nothing to resent," he told her, "so long as you'll try to forget mine."

As he walked out, turning to smile and bid her "Good morning" again, before he closed the door behind him, Claudia thought: 'I've seen him before somewhere. It must have been once when I went over to Crudlethorpe. Nice-looking fellow—and clever.'

The Jubilee not only brought extra work, it brought extra amusements; and Claudia found herself going out more than she had ever done in her life. Although Ferdinand Coster did not entertain largely, he had a considerable circle of friends, and such of them as possessed sons of marriageable age were not averse from opening their doors to Claudia Coster, who—"and the old man makes no secret of it either!"—was not only Coster's partner but his heiress.

However business might interest her, Claudia had a young woman's natural love of clothes, a proper appreciation of admiration, and a real affection for music and the theatre. Both Ferdinand Coster and his wife encouraged her to spend money, and nothing seemed to give them greater pleasure than to see her in the evening, wearing some new and expensive dress. Little Fernanda regarded her mother as the most lovely thing in the world, and at the sight of her, elaborately dressed, carrying a huge feather fan or a bouquet of flowers, the child would dissolve into peal after peal of delighted laughter.

"Even 'Nanda conspires with the rest of you to make me extravagant," Claudia said. "When I've ruined you all you'll regret that you didn't allow me to remain a hard-working wine merchant, and let me leave society alone!"

Coster rubbed his hands, chuckling. "Where do you go tonight, then?"

"The Savoy, to see *Pinafore*. Robert's in town, and is calling for me."

She watched the smile of satisfaction which spread over the old man's face. Queer how jealous he was! How delighted he seemed whenever he heard that Robert was accompanying her, and how apt to scowl if he imagined that any particular man was paying her marked attention! He watched her leave that evening with Robert, and Claudia fancied that he slipped a note into Robert's hand as they were drinking their coffee in the big, over-decorated drawing-room.

As they drove down to the Savoy she watched Robert's handsome face with a sense of satisfaction. How tall he had grown, and how well he carried himself! His skin was so clear and the faint shading of a small, fair moustache suited him admirably.

"How's business, Robert?" she asked, more for the pleasure of hearing his voice than because she needed to know. Coster had invested money in Bower's, and she knew almost as much concerning the works as Robert himself.

He turned, smiling. "Booming along. David's a wonder-worker."

"David? Oh, young Betterton!"

"I'd like you to know him, Claudia."

"I have met him," she said. "We had a frightful row, he put me in my place and we parted friends."

"Yes, I heard something of it. But you'd like him apart from his work. He admires you frightfully."

"Is that a proof of his intelligence? I'm not certain that I care a great deal for young men with horny hands and machine oil in their nails."

Robert's face flushed. "What a typically cattish and beastly thing to say!" he exclaimed, with considerable heat. "'Pon my word, Claudia, I didn't think you were so small-minded.

David's a fine fellow, far better than some of those over-dressed beggars who were dancing after you last night."

"Possibly ; but those over-dressed beggars always smell nice."

For the first act of *Pinafore* Robert sat sulkily leaning back in the box. His resentment amused Claudia ; more, it gave her a certain satisfaction that he was so ready to stand up for his friend. More than once she shot a glance at his good-looking, clouded face, wondering how long he was going to be able to keep up his air of offended dignity.

At the interval he rose and said stiffly : "Would you mind if I went to smoke outside ?"

"Not at all, Robert. Smoke away your annoyance."

"No, but really"—his face cleared—"honestly, Claudio, you ought not to say those unconscionable things."

"I know—but I say them just the same. There, go and smoke."

He returned a few moments later, bringing with him a tall, red-faced man with a long, fair moustache.

"Claudio, someone we haven't seen for years—Major Broom."

The soldier held out his hand. "Mrs. Costah. Years ago. In the big kitchen at Marlingly, when the whole family swooped down on you like a pack of ravening wolves, and I took refuge with you and your brothah."

"I remember." She wondered why men of this type always said "Brothah", if they really believed that it sounded elegant. This was Victor Broom's brother, then. Well, Robert should have known better than to bring him. She hated the whole family. Broom showed no inclination to bow himself out of the box, either. He was leaning his long length against the wall and staring at her in open and obvious admiration.

"I've bin in Indiah," he said. "Home on long leave. London's a lonely kind of place, y'know. I was heah all by myself until I saw you and waylaid your brothah."

"Really. How long have you been home ?"

"Since the end of last yeah, as a mattah of fact. I came home on sick leave ; the amusin' old Afghan didn't behave too nicely to me."

The thought flashed into Claudia's mind that possibly he

could tell her something of Harriet. It might be that he had visited his brother, had seen her, talked to her. She smiled, patted the chair beside her and said: "Sit down, Major Broom. It's pleasant to see you again."

"That's kind of you." He laughed. "Aftah all, we're relations in a way, I mean—" He stopped suddenly, confused. "I mean, I was terribly sorry about your sistah. I was up theah, y'know. Went to see my brothah."

"Really!" Then, after a pause, "I wasn't."

"No, I was sorry about that. I mean—well—I don't suppose we want to talk about these sad things heah, do we?"

His whole manner had changed, Claudia felt. The spontaneous pleasure at finding someone with whom he might talk had gone. His cheerful, long horse-face was serious. He rose. "I think that perhaps I ought to get back to my stall."

"One moment. You think badly of me because I wasn't with my sister?"

"No, really, Mrs. Costah—"

"When you came in here to talk to me you had forgotten?"

"Well, it's difficult—that is—"

She nodded. "That's all right. Come and lunch with me tomorrow, will you? Let me see, I'm busy tomorrow. Can you face a cold luncheon? Then say one o'clock, and we'll lunch in my office at the works."

Broom reflected that she never seemed to doubt for a moment that he would come, never thought that he might have other engagements. She might be all that Victor had said, but she was a damned handsome woman just the same.

"At the works?"

"Coster's wharf and warehouse in Kepple Street off the Westminster Bridge Road. The cabbies all know it. One o'clock." She held out her hand; he was dismissed. He walked back down the narrow corridors to the auditorium, tugging his fair moustache, muttering softly: "'Pon my soul!"

"Harrow," Claudia Coster said next morning, "when the hamper from Portland Square arrives, lay the table in my office. I want a bottle of Setubal, then—no, not champagne. Let me have a Liebfrauenstift, and then the brandy that is in my small cupboard, and the big goblets."

As Big Ben boomed one o'clock, Major Broom arrived. 'His suit,' Claudia thought, 'might have been made out of horsecloth!' He carried a brown bowler hat in his hand, along with a pair of bright brown gloves. He stared round the comfortable office, noticed the flowers in their tall, cut-glass vases, the stiff damask cloth, the silver, and decided that Coster's did themselves remarkably well. He admired Claudia's clothes, the bodice cut rather like a man's tail-coat, with elbow-length sleeves from which descended loose linen under-sleeves fastened with silver links, worn over a long, full skirt with the faintest hint of a bustle. The linen shirt which protruded from the coat front was of a snowy crispness which pleased him. Her manner was friendliness itself.

"This is something of an adventuah for me," he said, "to lunch with a business lady."

"Woman," Claudia corrected. "We're all women in business, you know."

"And ladies away from it, eh?"

"Not always."

He sipped his wine, then held it up to the light. "By Jove, this is admirable! I don't know it. . . ." He looked at the bright amber liquid with a worried frown.

"Another adventure for you," Claudia said. "It's heavy, that's its great fault. Too heavy; but the bouquet is wonderful. Not an expensive wine. Have another glass. . . ."

Later, as he sipped his old brandy, he said with some hesitation: "I suppose this place *does* keep you pretty well tied."

Claudia sat upright in her chair, her hands clasped before her.

"Very tied," she said, "but not so tied that I could not come and see my sister."

"Oh, I assuah you," Broom protested, "I had no——"

"Now, come, your thought was obvious. This place—work—business—then out of the kindness of your heart, and because that brandy is very mellowing to the mind, you decided that 'perhaps, after all, she couldn't get away'. No, that wasn't why, Major Broom."

His pleasant, rather stupid face assumed an expression of

acute discomfort. True, Claudia Coster was a beautiful woman ; no doubt she was clever, possessing great ability ; but—confound it—you didn't discuss topics of this kind over a luncheon-table, and a damned good luncheon at that ! He almost wriggled in his chair with embarrassment.

"One doesn't want to talk about these things," he stammered. Probably she had been absorbed in her work, even during luncheon she had risen three times to answer telephone calls, and once to scribble an order on a pad which a clerk brought her. "It's your business. I mean, I don't want you to think that I blame you whatevah you did—that is, probably you had your own reasons."

"Other people had their reasons," she corrected him coolly. "I want to discover how much you know about it, Major Broom." Her whole voice had changed ; from its low, almost indolent pitch it had become sharp and self-assertive. He felt that she was giving him orders.

"Why wasn't I sent for ?" she asked. "Didn't my sister want me ? Had she forgotten me ? Did she share your brother's dislike of me because I had dared to speak the truth ?"

Broom twisted the big goblet which held his brandy, then raised it and drank down the precious fluid at one draught. He knew that his face was scarlet, felt conscious that this was perilously near to being a scene—and scenes were dreadful things to contemplate.

"But you were sent for," he said, lifting his eyes and meeting hers.

"Who by ?"

"Your sistah and my brothah, Victor."

"You surprise me. When and how was this, please ?"

He wiped his damp forehead and frowned in his effort to concentrate.

"I was there," he said. "It was evident that your poor sistah was very ill. Victor sent for your mothah. Your sistah began to cry, and say that she wanted to see you. There was some discussion—well, scarcely a discussion, because Vic was always ready to do anything that she wished, as you know."

"I *don't* know," Claudia said. "However—go on."

"I ventured to shove my oar in and say that I thought

Harrie was right, that whatevah difference—er—of opinion there had been between you and Vic, you had a right to be there.” He paused and drew a deep breath.

Claudia nodded towards the decanter. “Have some more brandy. Yes, and then?”

“Well, Vic agreed. He went off and wrote the lettah and brought it back to show your sistah. She added a couple of lines. I say, Mrs. Coster, do you want the whole story?”

“Everything you can tell me, please.”

“Then Vic handed the lettah to me and said, ‘Read that, will you? I should like you to see that I have literally—buried the hatchet.’ I read it. It was a really nice lettah, kindly and friendly. There were a couple of lines from your sistah added. Rather pathetic, ‘pon my soul. Vic said that he would post it himself, and picked it up and went out. Harriet got a bit excited after he’d gone and begged me to go and see that—that he didn’t forget it.”

“You mean that she doubted if he’d really post it, eh?”

“Well, she was excited, worried, frightened, I think. I did as she asked, and actually saw him leave the house with the lettah in his hand. So I know that it really went that night.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Do you really? Either you have a very beautiful and trusting nature, or—you don’t know your brother Victor very well. I never had the letter because it was never sent. Harrie died in the belief that I was too small-minded to come to the house of a man I loathed and despised.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, it’s too late to do anything now.”

“You mean to say that you believe my brothah would willingly, consciously withhold a lettah asking you to come to your dying sistah?”

She leant forward over the shining table, her hands clasped. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth was a thin, scarlet line, her voice held nothing but intense bitterness.

“I believe—I know that your brother would willingly and consciously do anything that pleased him. He has made God in his own image, and in that he is at least whole-hearted. He lives for himself entirely. I once told him that not man, God, or the devil himself should keep me from my sister if she

wanted me. I was too certain. The devil—your damned brother—won. Harrie's out of it, but, by God, the game's still playing, and he shan't get away with it!"

Broom started to his feet. "Mrs. Coster, I can't sit heah and listen to you making those statements about my brothah. I'm not particularly fond of him, but—well, confound it—I can't listen to that kind of wild talk. It's insufferable."

Claudia stood up, pushing back her chair. "Then you must go if you don't want to listen. Oh, I'm upset, I'm not quite myself. Harrie was my sister, and . . ." He heard her catch her breath, and saw that her eyes were full of tears. "There, you'd better go, Major Broom. I'm not fit to talk to."

"If what you think is true," he said gravely, "then I must apologize. There aren't words bad enough for him. I'll go, Mrs. Coster, and thank you for having allowed me—"

"Oh, don't stand there being polite!" she cried. "Please go, and leave me alone!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE Jubilee was over, though the festivities continued all through the winter. The Costers departed for the South of France, and on her return Claudia flung herself into work once more. Ferdinand was growing old, and more and more he left the main part of the work to her. True, he was always anxious to be consulted, always declined to leave the actual tasting to anyone else, but the real authority, the real responsibility, was hers. She had long ago ceased to return to Portland Square for luncheon, and even gave small parties at the works in her own office in order to save time and still keep in touch with people she liked.

One morning in May, she sat there with her brother Robert ; Claudia leaning back in one of the big arm-chairs, Robert with his arm along the high mantelpiece, looking down at her.

“You’re a damned handsome woman, Claudio !”

“You’re not so repellent yourself, Robert.”

She looked at him, her eyes suddenly tender. At twenty, Robert Marsden was very well satisfied with life. He was popular at Bower’s, he spent a good deal of time in London, he went with his beautiful sister to houses which would have been closed to him as the mere representative of Bower’s Agricultural Works. Now, leaning indolently against the dark marble mantelpiece, he looked the complete young man about Town, in his long grey frock-coat with the wide silk lapels, his waistcoat cut rather low to display his expensive tie with its pearl pin. Narrow trousers and patent-leather boots completing his costume.

“You’re terribly smart,” Claudia said.

Robert smiled and fingered his fair moustache. “Have to be, my dear. I’ve not the slightest intention of degenerating into Bower’s bagman. I don’t want to have to force my way

into offices, I want the doors to open to me. And open pretty smartly too."

"And do they—in those clothes?"

He laughed. "If they don't, I can usually find a way to make 'em."

"Lucky Robert."

"I dunno. Doors open easily enough to you, Claudia, don't they?"

"A good many of them. The trouble is that I'm never very interested in what's inside."

"You ought to get married again," Robert told her. "You're far too handsome to live a life of single blessedness."

"So Gerald Broom told me before he went back to India. I might, if I found anyone who interested me sufficiently."

"Poor old Broom's a non-starter, then! I don't blame you. Decent, but a dull old stick."

"He didn't strike me as being a way out."

"Way out from what?" Robert asked.

Claudia sprang up and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Robbie, I don't believe that I really know. I'm restless. I want new experiences, new sights and sounds. Maybe I want Yorkshire. The South of France, Portland Square, these semi-state visits to vineyards and châteaux, don't interest me very much. I think that I began my life too early. I've been doing this"—she made a movement with her expressive hands which included Coster's warehouses—"since I was nineteen. I was married too young—I was too young when 'Nanda was born. I crowded too much into too few years."

Robert considered gravely for a moment, then bent forward and kissed her. "You work too hard," he said. "You're never out of this place. Oh, I know it's regarded as something of an honour to be invited down to Kepple Street to one of Claudia Coster's luncheons, but you ought to get out more. You want a holiday. Take a holiday—come down to Tunbridge for the Show."

"Show? What show is this?"

"Agricultural Show. Ignorant wench you are, Claudio! Big affair. H.R.H. is going to open it on the first day, and Edward Bower on the second. David and I are staying at

mother's place—plenty of fun if you'd come down. We've got the finest thing out ! Don't tell a soul, Claudia. It's an electric skimmer. Takes every drop of cream off your milk as clean as a whistle. That's worth seeing alone, I promise you. That tame inventor of ours is a marvel."

Claudia considered. "I might. Tame inventor—you mean young Betterton ?"

"Who else ? Will you come, Claudio ?"

"I can't say. I must see how father is. Since mother died in January he's lonely, poor old man. Will it be a really smart affair, Robert ? I mean, can I cut a dash and live up to you ?"

He grinned. "You can try to."

That night she told Ferdinand Coster that she wanted a holiday. He looked up, his old face anxious. "Then let us take one, my dear."

"I thought of going down to mother's place at Tunbridge Wells."

He moved restlessly. "Tunbridge Wells ! Silly dead-and-alive place. Come to Paris."

"You know I loathe Paris, darling. No, I want to go and see the Show."

"Ah, that dull Bower is to be there ! You're not going to marry him, are you, Claudio ?"

She came over to where he sat, and laid her arm round his shoulders.

"I am not going to marry Edward, nor Major Broom, nor Isidore Pinto's brother, nor—anyone else that I can think of at the moment. Now, will you try to curb that jealousy of yours, and be good ? I'll leave 'Nanda as a hostage."

As she travelled down to Kent, she stared out at the neat fields, the carefully trained hops, the little quiet streams, and the hills in the far distance. Letting down the window she folded her arms on the frame, and let her thoughts wander. Here and there was an old manor house, there a cottage with the typically Kentish slanting roof, there a tall oast house. Claudia sighed.

"It's a pretty county, but it's like all these southern places, and most of the southern people—too soft, too easy, too attractive. I wonder if I shall ever get back to my, own cold, bleak,

rather hard Yorkshire.' Then, as if arguing with herself, she added, 'Patience, only have patience. Marlingly won't run away. It's being cared for now, and one day, when you've finished the job you took on, you can go back and really look after it—take care of it as if it were Robert translated into terms of bricks and mortar.'

That evening, when she went round to her mother's house for dinner, Claudia decided that since her father's death her mother had blossomed again. She had sufficient money, she had a pleasant house, servants who were well trained and affectionately respectful. She looked younger, the colour had returned to her hair, her cheeks were more rounded, her eyes brighter.

"You ought to have stayed here," she protested, "and not been turned out to an hotel for Robert and his friend. I don't like it."

"I'm very comfortable at the 'Camberly', darling."

"That's right. What a lovely dress, Claudia!"

"Is it? Robert likes pretty clothes." She twisted before the long glass panel defaced with painted swans gliding among stiff bulrushes, and felt a sense of satisfaction. The apricot silk dress, with its huge black bow at the back, its full skirt and lack of sleeves, suited her. Her shoulders were beautifully white, and the narrow strips of diamond-studded velvet which served in the place of sleeves made their whiteness more apparent.

Robert was late. Robert always was late, and Claudia sat down at the upright piano, with its draping of an Indian shawl, and candle-holders with their crinkled pink glass protectors, and strummed the latest song from *Dorothy*. How pleasant it would be to fall in love, hopelessly and painlessly, with Hayden Coffin, as did so many of the women she knew! They visited the theatre again and again, they found happiness in sending him flowers, magnificent presents, and hoped he might guess from whom they came.

"But you don't know him, Daisy," Claudia had objected to a friend a few days before. "Have you ever met him?"

"I once shook hands with him at a reception at Lady Markley's. Oh, my dear, the thrill!"

"And you sent him presents ? No name ?"

"Dar-ling, he might send them back !"

"Then that would prove he didn't want them. Why worry the poor man ?"

"My lamb, have you *no* imagination ?"

"Not along those lines, I'm afraid."

As she played, she wondered what possible satisfaction they could find in pestering a man whom they scarcely knew. Wondered if the time would ever come again when she might feel her heart beat faster because some man told her that he loved her. Edward had asked her several times to marry him, asked tentatively and almost as if he apologized for bothering her ; Gerald Broom had stammered and stuttered, had grown hot and damp and begged her to "try Indiah, Claudia, see how you like being a soldiah's wife. I swear that I'd be good to you".

"But if I didn't like it, Gerald, what then ?"

"Oh, but you would, everyone likes Indiah. Women have a glorious time theah, believe me."

Other men had paid her attention, young Louis Pinto had sighed and pressed his hand over his heart, he had quoted poetry to her, even written her a set of verses which didn't scan, stating that she was "envied of the moon, who—having seen you—looks so poor and pale".

"Why should she look poor and pale because she saw me, Louis ?" Claudia asked.

"Because she is envious of your beauty."

"That might make her look yellow—they say people look yellow or green, I forget which, with jealousy, but not poor and pale. No, Louis, stick to wine and leave poetry alone."

Claudia sighed. She would have been so glad to have fallen in love with any of them, they were all so nice, so kind, and there were times when Louis, at least, was amusing, but they—didn't matter. No man had mattered to her since Francis Coster in the first days of their marriage. She left the piano and walked to the window, fingering the heavy velvet curtains.

"Whew, how hot it is ! Everything done to shut out the air. How can mama breathe ?"

The front door banged, voices were heard in the hall,

Claudia moved back to the hearth, where the fire-place was filled with masses of white horsehair, among which nestled threads of gold. The door opened and Robert came in, with David Betterton at his heels.

Both of them were dressed for the evening, both were dressed correctly, but there was a difference between Robert's London-made "claw-hammer" coat, and that which Betterton had evidently had made by a provincial tailor. Robert's stiff shirt-front, his immaculate white waistcoat and thin gold chain, gave the impression that he was "London" transplanted to Tunbridge Wells. Betterton looked, what indeed he was, a good-looking young man, carefully dressed, but whose clothes lacked both style and cut.

Robert said: "Hope we're not late, Claudie. You and David have met before I think?"

She held out her hand. "I remember the meeting quite well."

"And I." He smiled. His face lost its rather heavy, over-serious expression, his eyes brightened, his mouth softened, and he looked younger and more attractive. "Is the machine still running?"

"It was two days ago. My father swears by it."

"There was a time when I felt like swearing at it," David said.

"If I remember rightly, I was the person who did all the swearing."

During dinner, Claudia and Robert did most of the talking. She delighted to watch him growing enthusiastic, it gave her a sense of satisfaction to listen to his rather clipped speech, so different from the slow, broad speech of Edward Bower, so different from the affected drawl of Gerald Broom. Robert laughed a good deal, showed his strong white teeth, even used his hands more than was customary. To Claudia he was eminently satisfactory, and their mother, as she watched them, thought what a handsome pair they made, her boy and girl, and how proud she was of them both. It was almost as good as a play to Mrs. Marsden to hear Robert teasing Claudia about these strange women who really believed that women had a right to have a voice in public affairs, to hear Claudia responding

quickly that whatever mistakes the women made they couldn't make a worse mess of governing than the men had done.

"My dear, how can women help to govern, how can they even vote? They know nothing of procedure, nothing of the actual business of the House of Commons."

"They can learn, I suppose," she flashed back. "After all, the moment a man is elected the mantle of Elijah doesn't actually fall on to his shoulders."

"But men have been governing for hundreds of years——"

"And last year you stood waving your hat when a little old lady in a bonnet celebrated her Jubilee!"

"Ah." Robert's good-looking face was suddenly sentimental. "The Queen, God bless her. You're not going to take her as an example."

"Why not? She was brought up with the idea that she was going to be queen—well, she's been queen. I run Coster's, and I wasn't brought up to it. That shows you what an ordinary woman can do."

Robert pushed back his dessert-plate, folded his arms and looked, smiling, at his sister.

"Angel, you're not ordinary. You've been listening to that astonishing Mrs. Fawcett, Miss Garrett and the rest of them. No one takes them seriously, y'know. These women who try to get into County Councils, they only do it because they want notoriety. I sometimes doubt if they even take themselves seriously. What do you say, David?"

"I don't think," David Betterton said slowly, "that being on the voter's list would really add to women's enjoyment of life."

Claudia stared at him across the table, suddenly insolent.

"Were we talking of enjoyment or justice?"

"I didn't say that we were talking about either. I was merely making a statement."

"I am talking about—rights," she persisted. "You seem to forget, as so many men choose to do, that emancipation counts for something in the minds of decent people."

"Rights!" Robert laughed. "Don't you mean privileges?"

"I mean what I said."

"What are rights now," David said, his voice very temperate, "had to be fought for. They were privileges fought for

and granted by the nobles, they were gathered as it were step by step."

She moved impatiently. "Oh, hair-splitting. Robert summed up the whole position. Rights for you, privileges for us."

David frowned. He had watched her lose her temper once, and felt that he might witness it again, an occurrence which would go far to ruin this excellent dinner. What a strange woman she was! Laughing one moment, the next ready to fight like a tigress.

Charlotte said, mildly, "Well, Claudio dear, Robert may be right. Women are the weaker sex. They could never take their part—say—in a war. No woman could have defended Khartoum as poor General Gordon did."

"And no woman would have taken so long to make up her mind to send help to him as Mr. Gladstone did!" Claudio said. "Didn't Florence Nightingale do anything when it came to war? I don't think that women want to take the place of men, what they want is their own place."

She relapsed into silence, twisting the stem of her wine-glass so that the candlelight caught the diamonds in her rings and made them shoot out sparks of colour like small, malicious eyes. Robert leant back in his chair smiling tolerantly, as if he knew that his sister had tried to tackle a subject too big for her. Suddenly she looked up, her eyes met David's over the table, he was half shocked to find how cold and critical they were.

"Women have a place in the world," she said. "What they want is recognition, they want the admission that their work is of real value, of sufficient value to make them eligible to raise a voice in the government of their country. Don't you agree?" She put the question direct to David. "Isn't managing a home, bearing children, rearing those children, fitting them to be decent citizens, as important as—men's work?" she demanded.

"As important," David said, "quite as important. Only women in time of war cannot take their place in the fighting line, they cannot take their share of danger with the men. Their work lies in more sheltered paths, in safer, more peaceful spheres."

Claudia flung back her head in contempt. "Then war is

the touchstone ! War, the ability to fight, is the test of an ability to help to govern the country ! Tell me, did Disraeli ever fight, or Melbourne, or Peel, or Gladstone, or Churchill, or Salisbury ? Sheltered paths, peaceful and safer spheres. How dare you ! How many women in this country die in childbirth, how many women face the suffering of bringing children into the world at the risk—risk, mind you—of their lives ? Sheltered paths, peaceful spheres ! Until you know how far a woman can be dragged, to what depths of misery she can be drawn, by a dissolute, drunken husband, don't dare to use those damned silly catch-phrases."

Charlotte said gently, "Claudia, my dear—please."

"Mama, let me finish. I might as well insure against either Robert or Mr. Betterton making such egregious fools of themselves again. You talk as if either of you had the right to run this country. And you allow the slums to continue, you allow a child to have one parent—unless it's born out of wedlock, and then it still has one—its mother. You allowed children to burst their lungs running with the silk to make it suitably twisted to make buttonholes, you allowed—yes, and still allow, women and children to work at Cradley Heath ! Women's work. Could either of you run Coster's, manage a huge house, attend to the wants of a delicate old man and a child like 'Nanda ? I advise you to try to do it, and then talk a little less of 'women's inability to do the same work as men'. Yes, mama, I'm ready."

As the door closed behind the two women, Robert walked back to his seat, and whistled. "Whew ! What do you make of that ? That's Claudia all over. Marvellous girl—but once she gets the bit in her teeth, how the fur flies !"

"I like her for it," Betterton said gravely. "I may not agree with her, I may even think it's a pity that she should think as she does, but she's honest and sincere, and I don't find too much of either quality lying about in the world."

Robert lit his cigar with care. Betterton's praise of his sister pleased him more than he cared to show. Her outburst had shocked Robert considerably, and it was a relief to find that David did not comment on it. Really, Claudie was far too outspoken—referring to childbirth, to dissolute husbands and so

on. No need to let the whole world know what a brute Coster had been. Far better to keep these things dark.

"Yes, probably you're right. I believe that she did have a bad time with her husband. He was no damned good, y'know. Ran after other women."

"Poor girl. I can't imagine anything more humiliating to a woman of her character," David said softly.

"Humiliation—I never thought of that. I don't wonder then that she's bitter about him. I can imagine Claudia forgiving most things, but never forgiving anyone who had humiliated her. She's awfully proud."

"You know what we say in the north," David said, "that there are two kinds of pride: clean pride and stinking pride. Hers is the clean kind all right."

Later, when they joined Claudia and her mother, Robert found his sister smiling and good-tempered again. She had evidently forgotten all about their argument and her own outburst, and was making Mrs. Marsden laugh with stories of 'Nanda. Robert slipped his arm round her and whispered:

"Sudden storms are short"—eh, Claudio?"

She turned her laughing face towards him. "Oh, you know me, Robbie." Then, stifling a yawn, she said: "I must get back to my hotel. I'm tired and I want to be up early. I don't want to miss anything of this Show of yours."

"Want to have a good look at H.R.H.?" Robert asked.

"I don't want to prevent him having a good look at me," she returned. "You stay and play piquet with mama, Robert. Mr. Betterton will take me back to the hotel. . . ."

They walked through the quiet streets and up the long hill which led to the hotel, scarcely speaking. More than once Claudia glanced at the young man and found that his broad shoulders, his long, easy strides, and his general sense of fitness pleased her. She imagined how he would face the hills of his own county, how lightly he would tread the springy heather, and with what satisfaction he would breathe the clean, cold air.

"You don't like towns much, do you, Mr. Betterton?" she asked abruptly.

"Not much, Mrs. Coster. We're alike in that."

"If I must live in a town, then that town must be London,"

she said ; "but I don't like them. You can't walk. I never walk in Town, I'm always too busy, and—anyway, where is there to walk, except in the Park ?"

"You couldn't call that walking either, could you ?"

"September and October are the worst times," Claudia went on, as if she had not heard him speak. "I get such nostalgia then for the moors. I know that they are turning, changing colour, that the trees are getting more and more golden every day, that there are miles of glorious purple heather, that by turning your head you can find scarlet, bronze, gold, and the silver of birch stems. Then I get restless and dissatisfied."

"Homesick," David said, "that's what you get. I should, too, if I ever went far away from Yorkshire. I don't have to move away far, that's lucky for me. If I did I don't believe that I could bear to think of the places I love. My interests are there. You know I want to make reapers and dairy machines, I want to invent this and that, and naturally I want farmers all over England, maybe all over the world, to buy them, but what I want most is for north-country people to get the benefit of them, so that north-country farming can increase in efficiency, dairy work be made easier and more profitable. I doubt that we're a parochially minded lot, Mrs. Coster."

"I don't know. Perhaps. I think my own dreams are all centred as yours are. Only mine are centred round an old house, a little girl and Robert. Let's hope one day we'll both make our dreams realities."

"Let's hope so."

Before she went to bed, she took out the dress which she was to wear the following day, and held it at arm's length. Perhaps it was too smart, almost bad taste to wear these clothes at a provincial show, they were more suitable for Ascot or Goodwood. A long, rather severe coat in grey and silver brocade, showing an underskirt and bodice of white silk, both embroidered in silver thread. A hat of Tuscan straw, trimmed with grey and white feathers curling over the brim, and a parasol of closely pleated silk, with feathers sewn round the edge, and a grey enamel handle studded with paste. Grey shoes, made by a famous house in Paris, gloves which matched the dress exactly and bore the name of the best makers in Vienna.

Too elaborate, Claudia decided, then, smiling suddenly, hung the dress up in the huge wardrobe again, saying softly : 'Come, Claudia, loyalty demands that you shall look your best for the future king of England.' She undressed slowly, and when stripped of her silk petticoat, with its frills and short train, when she had removed the dreadful stays of steel and whalebone, each metal stiffening embroidered at the ends with an arrow-head in pale-blue silk, Claudia Coster ceased to look a mature woman and appeared as she really was, little more than a slim girl of remarkable beauty. For a moment she held her night-gown at arm's length, and wondered what mama would say if she knew how much it had cost. Claudia felt certain that she would have declared that it was far too elaborate, that there was no necessity for "nice women" to adopt such elegant night clothes. Still, the fine cambric felt delicious, and the Valenciennes lace was the finest she had ever seen. Ferdinand Coster had produced it one day and given it to her, saying : "There, my Claudia, and it hasn't paid one penny of duty. That makes it all the better, eh ?" The high frill at the neck, finished with a bow of wide pink ribbon like a French student's neck-*tie*, pleased her, and she turned slowly before the long pier glass, filled with satisfaction. Why shouldn't a woman wear nice clothes in bed ? She had always hated the plain night-gowns which she had worn as a girl, and even then had determined that one day she would devise something more becoming.

"Well, my dear," she said to her reflection, "if you can look as well tomorrow as you do tonight, all those hours spent in Louise's fitting-rooms won't have been wasted—or will they ? You never know with these Yorkshiremen." Then, as if admitting a thought which even to herself she had previously kept hidden, she laughed, and pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE four days of the Show were to Claudia a succession of bright pictures flashed on to a screen, and the most important, the most interesting, of those pictures were the ones which contained the figure of David Betterton.

They began—her pictures—with the sight of Robert, in a light suit, rather a bright-blue tie, a white “York” rose in his buttonhole, standing with David at the big stall which bore the name of Edward Bower of Crudlethorpe, Yorkshire, in white letters on a blue ground. Robert, smiling, laughing, exchanging sallies with everyone who stopped to talk to him ; David more serious, but with eyes which danced whenever Robert made a verbal “hit”.

She watched the Prince, in a long, rather tight frock-coat with the new-fashioned velvet collar, stop for a moment and ask a question in his deep, rather guttural voice, concerning some of the machinery. Robert answered, his young voice sounding curiously light and high.

“Our latest invention, sir. Electric skimming—quite simple. Oh, it does all we claim for it, sir.” Robert actually smiling as if he had made a joke and really expected the Prince to laugh at it. David admitting, in answer to a question, that he was the inventor, his face scarlet with confusion, tongue-tied, almost unable to make his bow as he ought to have done. Somehow, the sight of David’s embarrassment made Claudia feel very tender towards him.

Later, when the great ones of the earth had passed on, Robert told her all about it. “Actually asked questions about David’s machine. He has a model dairy of his own. What an advertisement for us if he orders one ! Old Edward will be frightfully cock-a-hoop.”

“Was David pleased ?” she asked, smiling.

“I expect so. But look at him now, he’s taking far more

trouble, and making himself far more pleasant to that old farmer in the square-crowned hat and cloth leggings than he did to the nobility and gentry. I don't believe that titles and names mean a thing to David."

Claudia shrugged her shoulders. "After all, why should they? Customers are customers, everyone pays the same price for what they buy—or ought to."

"Scarcely getting at the root of it," Robert assured her with a slight air of amused tolerance, as if he instructed her in the rudiments of business. "People with names are not only customers, they're advertisements. What the Duke of Blankshire wants for his model farm, John Smith will order for his little place tucked away somewhere in the Mendip Hills."

Then David's deep voice made Claudia start, as he came up behind them, laughing a little. "Nay, John Smith won't," he said. "He'll only want it if he happens to agree with your friend the Duke—that it's a good proposition. Don't you under-rate the brains of the small farmer, young Robert."

When the sun was high, the whole show-ground shimmering in the heat, Claudia declared that she must have a cool drink or die. Robert was busy with a customer; David was standing near him, doing nothing.

"Come and lunch with me, Mr. Betterton!"

He hesitated. "I don't see why not. I'll just tell Robert.

"He's a far better salesman than I," David told Claudia as they sat in the big marquee, eating excellent cold chicken pie, and drinking some thinnish red wine which Claudia declared to be *Château la Pompe*. "He is far more able than you might imagine; he knows what he's selling, and he knows how to make his customers understand. I get too involved, too technical. Just the same, Robert would rather sell ten pounds' worth to Lord Welling, than twenty pounds' worth to Farmer Giles. There's another thing, too: Lord Welling would enjoy being Robert's customer far more than old Giles would. I believe sometimes that his smartness, his clothes and the latest thing in ties, rather frighten these yeomen farmers."

"Don't tell him so!" Claudia laughed. "To discard his beautiful clothes would break Robert's heart!"

"If I have seemed to belittle him," Betterton said quickly, and with great sincerity, "let me put that right at once. You see, he usually sells to firms, not to individuals. They like him—oh, everyone likes him, and they've every reason to. There isn't a better fellow alive."

She made him talk, talk of his own work, and soon he began to draw little diagrams for her on the cloth to illustrate his descriptions. She noticed how steady his hands were, how quickly and cleanly he drew the fine lines, and how lucid were the explanations which he gave. Noticed, too, that the moment he had demonstrated his point, he carefully rubbed out what he had drawn with a little bit of crusty bread.

"How careful you are! You don't think that anyone would come here stealing ideas, do you?"

Betterton nodded. "Indeed I do, Mrs. Coster. Do you know that at the works my sketches, plans, and the model of my new machine are always kept under lock and key? Only Sir Edward and I have keys to the office. I'm on the point of making one of the biggest inventions for farming that's been made in the last fifty—nay, last hundred years. I swear that I'm not boasting, it's the simple, honest truth."

She folded her arms on the table, then said gravely, "Can you trust me?"

Speaking more broadly than was his wont, David said slowly: "Ay, I can trust thee—listen. . . ."

As his eyes met hers she experienced a strange, almost disquieting sensation. It seemed that he had suddenly made a declaration, stated a fact which was both revealing and intimate. She wanted to cry to him, "Go on, David Betterton, that's only the beginning. We can trust each other. Don't tell me about the machine for a moment, let me try to tell you that with you I feel safe, secure, as if I'd come home."

While his deep, quiet voice went on evenly, telling her of his marvellous invention, a self-binder, which should halve the number of people needed to gather a harvest, that sense of revelation persisted for Claudia Coster.

". . . the knot bothered me for a long time. Then I found that if the twine was payed out regularly, caught—here and here"—he pointed with his pencil to the little drawing which

he had made—"then round it goes, so, and so. Twists here, and the knife slips in and cuts it. The thing was done! Easy as cutting butter with a hot knife, eh?"

He turned to her, laughing, and she noticed that when he smiled little wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes, noticed too how those bright-blue eyes danced and twinkled. "That's a nice thing!" he said. "Here am I, lunching with 'the beautiful Mrs. Coster', and all I can find to talk about is machinery."

"Who said that I was 'the beautiful Mrs. Coster'?"

"Robert first told me that was what you were called in the wine trade, and—well, my own eyes are pretty sharp."

"The bad-tempered Mrs. Coster" might be a more exact description," Claudia said.

"No, no, that's where you're wrong," David protested. "You're not bad-tempered, you're—what's the word I want?—mettlesome! That's it."

"You don't know me. You've only met me—how often?—three times in all."

He flushed, and twisted the pencil in his strong fingers. "Unless I've bored you too badly, we might perhaps meet again some time. I do come up to London now and then." He rose. "Let me take you back to Robert, I expect you're tired." Then, as if he forgot the proposal as quickly as he had made it, he went on, "I don't think anyone knows how much I envy Robert sometimes. I'd give a lot to be like him. To be able to wear clothes as he does, to talk easily, ~~to~~ have his pleasant manners, and his ability to make people like him. Alongside Robert I feel like a dray horse beside a racer."

As if impatient with himself and his own words, he picked up Claudia's parasol and handed it to her. His face was grave, his eyes had lost their twinkle, and he fumbled clumsily with the money which he took from his pocket.

"No, no!" Claudia said quickly. "I asked you to have luncheon with me. Put that money away, please."

"What, have you pay for my dinner? Nay, that's something I can't do, even to please you, Mrs. Coster."

His big jaw protruded suddenly; she knew that it would be useless to argue with him and regretted that she had allowed

herself to drink wine—at his expense. Vaguely she wondered what Edward Bower paid him.

She returned to her hotel and, taking off her elaborate clothes, threw herself down on the bed, her fingers laid over her eyes. Her mouth smiled, and once she laughed softly.

“Poor David—he doesn’t know what’s happened !” Then, more seriously, “Thank God, I do ! Oh, Claudia Coster—I promise you, you shall be happy ! Just be patient a little longer.”

The following day it seemed to her that everything had slipped a little out of gear. Edward arrived to open the show for the second day. He had grown stouter, his face looked heavy and his eyes were rather bloodshot. His clothes were too elaborate—a grey frock-coat, grey top-hat, over-large button-hole and patent boots made him look enormous. He insisted that she should make the tour of the show with him and the little group of county notables who accompanied him. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he found her far more interesting than the exhibits.

“This is delightful, Claudia, delightful. Might I say how much I admire your gown ?”

“Dress, Edward. Gowns are for dowagers ! Ah, you should have seen me yesterday ! This black-and-white silk is nothing compared with what Madame Louise evolved for me to wear yesterday.”

“This is sufficiently dazzling-!”

“Edward, you must attend to the exhibits—that’s what you’re here for.” The tour completed, they were back at his own stall. Robert came forward, talking rapidly, explaining how much business had been done, reporting the success of the new skimmer. Edward listened tolerantly, contentedly.

“That’s good hearing, Robert. Good morning, Betterton.”

“Good morning, Sir Edward.”

“You have met our miracle-worker, Claudia ?”

“Mr. Betterton—we’re old enemies, Edward, and great friends.”

“Splendid.” But somehow she didn’t feel that Edward meant what he said, and the thought amused her. As for David, he did nothing ! He scarcely spoke to her, there was

none of the friendship of yesterday, he was stiff, unbending and coldly respectful. She wondered if he might ask her to lunch with him, but he made no attempt to speak to her alone, and presently Edward claimed her and carried her off to the table reserved for "the county".

"I lunched down there yesterday," Claudia said, pointing to a lower table.

"My dear Claudia ! I'm so sorry, if only I'd been here——"

"Oh, your Mr. Betterton took great care of me, I assure you."

Edward turned his protruding eyes on her. "You lunched with Betterton ? How very kind of you ! I hope you weren't terribly bored."

"I enjoyed it. He's an interesting young man."

Edward took the menu from a waiter. "Umph, umph—quite a good fellow. Now, Claudia, will you take the luncheon, or shall I order something *à la carte* ? Let's see—lobster mayonnaise, and a little cold chicken—salad—and afterwards—oh, we'll see. Now I want it all very cold, remember, waiter, and the chicken—two wings—liver wing for madam and a little breast. The salad, very crisp, and make the dressing when you bring the salad, I don't want it poured over it. Now the wine list—let's see—what did you drink yesterday ?"

She caught the change of tone, and thought : 'That's mean, Edward. You want me to admit that it was a foul wine.' Aloud she said : "I forget, something quite pleasant, a lightish burgundy I fancy."

"Champagne—yes, I think so. 'The Widow' ?"

Claudia took the wine list. "No-o-o, I think not. Ayala—not here. I must find out who the caterers are, Edward, I can see some business here. Krug—not here either ! Pol Roger ! That's all right. Waiter ! We don't want this iced to death, remember—and what glasses have you ?" She would show Edward ! "Those low, shallow things on stems ? No, I want something more like a brandy-goblet—you know what I mean ?"

Resolutely she began to talk of wines, determined to prove to Edward that she was a capable, businesslike person, one who understood the various points of recognizing a good wine.

She gave him information regarding the various shipping houses, she discussed the rival merits of different brands, the best woods for casks, and the prospects for the coming year. Edward listened with stolid attention, and when she stopped—because she had grown bored, not because she had lost his attention—he sighed deeply.

"There's no one like you, Claudia. I don't believe another woman exists with a head for business like yours. It's astonishing, eh? I don't know where you learnt it all. Difficult, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not particularly. It interests me."

He crumbled his bread and, with his eyes watching the little pellets which he pushed this way and that, said: "I suppose you never think of giving it up, eh? I mean—you don't get tired of it, and want a home, do you?"

"I have a lovely home—with Ferdinand Coster, Edward."

"Yes, I know, I know. But—look here, you're too young to live alone, you want someone to take care of you, Claudia, someone who'll look after Fernanda, too. Why don't you marry me? I've got Seston, lovely gardens, and you like gardens; I've made a hit in the mechanical world; I'm in the running for a peerage—I've given—well, it don't matter but I've got the Cottage Hospital free of debt and running like a clock at Crudlethorpe, recreation ground and a working men's club—those things count, now they're getting so keen on improved conditions for the lower classes. I mean—well, I could give you all you wanted, couldn't I? I've never even thought of another woman. Claudia, I have been patient, haven't I, eh? I've not pestered you to death—won't you consider it?"

He spoke with evident sincerity, his heavy, kindly face was damp with sweat, and he wiped it carefully. As he passed his handkerchief over his forehead, Claudia noticed how fast the hair was beginning to recede, and how white he was at the temples. She felt sorry for this big, successful man, who was so obviously lonely.

"Edward—I'm terribly sorry—I can't."

"There isn't anyone else, is there?"

"My dear, who else could there be?"

"I thought sometimes that feller Broom——"

"I can put your mind at rest on that score. I wouldn't marry Gerry Broom if he was the only man in the world."

He laid his red, freckled hand on hers for a second, then said : "I shan't give up hope, y'know. Faint heart never won fair lady, eh ?"

That night he gave a dinner at the big hotel where he stayed. There were speeches, flattering references to Bower's machines, Bower's works, and Bower himself. Edward replied, heavily, sensibly, reasonably. He was patriotic without lapsing into "jingoism", he was tolerant without being indifferent, and Claudia felt that a tall, thin man near her summed Edward up correctly when he whispered : "That's a sound man, sound as he can be ! We want more men of that type, by gad, we do !"

Far down the table she saw Robert, talking with great animation to an elderly lady in plum-coloured velvet and old-fashioned jewellery. Further still, the light caught David Betterton's bright hair, and she forgot to listen to her partner for a moment as she watched his grave face as he bent forward to catch a remark which was addressed to him across the table. She wished that he would look towards her, for she felt lonely, deserted, felt that the whole day had been dull and purposeless.

" . . . decided to enlarge the place. I think I was wise."

She turned back to her partner with a start. "Decidedly," she said ; "the only possible thing to do." Then wondered what on earth he had been talking about.

For a moment she was able to speak to David. The dinner was over, and the guests wandered out into the gardens. Claudia saw him, leaning over a stone balustrade, and turning to her companion who was still chattering about his improvements to the house where he lived, she asked him if he would find her cloak which she had forgotten when they left the hall.

"Is it in the dining-room ?"

She considered, wondering if David would have moved away before she got rid of this old bore. "I scarcely think so. I left it in the hall—there's an elderly woman in charge. If it's not with her, then try the dining-room."

"And you'll wait here ? I want to tell you about my mushroom beds."

Smilingly she nodded, watched him disappear into the hotel, then walked over to where David stood.

"Would you like to rescue me, Mr. Betterton?"

He started, then turned to her. "Of course—from what danger?"

"The danger of being bored to death by an old man who wants to talk to me about mushrooms."

"And you run *into* a new danger. Another man might bore you to death talking about machinery."

"I like that, though I hate hearing about vegetables! Have you done well today?"

"I suppose so. Robert and Sir Edward seem delighted. I'm afraid that I've been slack today."

"Tomorrow will be different. . . ."

"Will it? I don't know."

Claudia laughed. "You're dull tonight. I'm angling for an invitation, and you don't seem to realize it. Must I put it into words?"

He stared at her. "I'm sorry. You're so magnificent to-night, you take my breath away."

"I am rather magnificent," she admitted. "Satin and emeralds. I don't like the dress much, but I felt that I owed it to Edward to make a splash for his banquet. Well, I'm still waiting for my invitation. . . ."

"I believe you're making fun of me," David said. "I don't care much if you are, it's good to be able to look at you. But I'll fall into the trap, if you have laid one. Mrs. Coster, will you have luncheon with me tomorrow?"

"Mr. Betterton, I shall be delighted."

He made a sudden impetuous movement, and touched her arm with the tips of his fingers. "I wonder if I dare ask you—no, I daren't!"

"Tell me what your question is?"

"No, I'll wait until tomorrow. Perhaps I shall be less afraid of you tomorrow."

"I promise that I shan't be—magnificent tomorrow. Good night."

That night she lay awake thinking, wondering, hoping, then

blaming herself for being ridiculous. 'A question—what question? It can't be! Claudia, my dear, you're a fool. He's only met you four times. Because you've fallen in love, you mustn't assume that he has! It might be half a dozen things—it might even be that he wants the name of my dress-maker for his own young woman!' She laughed softly. 'Well, if that's what it is, she damn' well shan't have it!'

So the following morning Claudia sauntered down to the show-ground just before luncheon, wearing a dress of pale-blue cotton, dotted with bunches of green leaves, trimmed with green ribbons and decorated with a wide band of coarse lace at the hem. She stood by Bower's stand for some moments talking to Robert, listening to what Edward had said, and how delighted Edward had been with everything.

"Everything except you, Claudio," Robert said. "He told me that you'd turned him down."

She threw back her head. "Then he had no right to tell you!"

"Oh, go on, don't be unkind about it. Poor old chap, he talks a lot to me. You might do worse, Claudio."

"Or better—perhaps. No, Robbie, I don't love him, I won't make another mistake, and I like Edward far too much to just marry him because he may get a peerage, and has lots of money."

"Pity! Still . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, and left it at that.

Then the luncheon tent again and the waiter, who had seen her on the previous day with Edward Bower, ushered them to the best table, and hung round them attentively.

"The lobster is excellent, madam—"

David said, "Yes, have some lobster."

"I want . . ." She considered. "I want cold beef, fairly underdone, salad, and—to drink—"

"Mumm, Bollinger, Perrier Jouet, or Pol Roger, madam."

"No—draught beer, in a tankard, and very cold."

"I ate too many elaborate things," she told David, "last night. I want simplicity today. Thank heaven, I can drink beer when I want to, nothing ever makes me fat."

He was not talkative, and Claudia chattered to him, trying to lift the obvious depression which weighed on him. She

wondered if it was due to the fact that Edward's wealth and importance had oppressed him, disheartened him a little, and longed to tell him that she had plenty of money for them both.

"Oh, what was the question?" she demanded. "You promised to ask it today."

His face flushed, and as she watched him, Claudia thought: 'I'd better put down my knife and fork, or he'll notice how my hands are shaking.'

"It was—you may consider it very impertinent, Mrs. Coster."

"I'll try hard to make allowances." She smiled.

The words came with a rush, as if he dared not allow himself to pause, "Are you engaged to Sir Edward?"

Claudia knew that her heart was beating heavily, knew that her hands trembled, that her voice was not to be relied on. She met his gaze steadily. "No," she said, not daring to say more.

David did not speak, he just stared at her with something in his eyes that Claudia Coster had never seen before in any man's, something so ineffably tender, something so utterly content, that she felt her eyes smart. It was as if he had come through a period of shattering, blinding fear, and had found himself secure, safe and at peace.

"Why did you want to know?" she asked, some of her confidence returning to her. The worst was over, she was even able to make a show of being interested in cutting up cold beef.

"You think it was just idle curiosity, perhaps?" David said, and she detected a certain suppressed resentment in his voice.

"I don't know. . . ." This time she laid down the knife and fork, and twisted round so that she faced him. He laid his hand on hers, and she felt his fingers close round her wrist.

"I'll tell you. Claudia—I'm fool enough to want to tell you that I love you. I scarcely know you, but what I do know tells me that there is no one else in the world who matters, or can ever matter to me—except you. Oh, I know it's presumption. I know that I'm Edward Bower's inventor, mechanic, workman. I know that you're"—he gave the words their full value—"the beautiful Mrs. Coster, rich, lovely, successful. I don't care, I've got to tell you this or go crazy. Claudia, I

love you quite unbearably. I don't think that I can live at all without you."

"Then, David, darling," she said, "why try to live without me?"

For the remainder of her life, Claudia never forgot his look of blank astonishment, never forgot how his face changed colour, every drop of blood seemed to drain from it, leaving it white under the tan. She saw how his lips trembled, quivering almost like a child's who, having been frightened, suddenly finds himself secure in his mother's arms.

"David, David," she begged softly, "my dearest, don't. Everything is all right. I'm here. I'm yours, oh, so unalterably and entirely yours."

"I can't believe it. I only told you that so that you might shatter my lovely dreams once and for all. You don't mean that you'll marry me?"

"You haven't paid me the compliment of asking me yet."

"Claudia—"

She laughed, the tension was broken, she could smile again.

"Are you going to ask me, or must I suppose that your dreams were strictly dishonourable?"

His face showed that she had shocked him. She wished she had remembered that David could not be teased as she had teased Major Broom, or Louis Pinto. He pushed his plate away from him, folded his arms on the table, and said very gravely :

"Claudia, dearest Claudia, will you marry me—and marry me soon?"

CHAPTER NINE

THEY sat in the big tent, which slowly emptied and left them the sole occupants. They were like two people marooned in a vast desert of white linen, with a canvas sky. David was telling her about himself.

“I’m just a nobody, you know, Claudia.”

“On the contrary, you’re a most important person. Haven’t I just promised to marry you ?”

“That makes me a tremendously proud fellow. Only you have a right to understand that I’m only a mechanic, who has had considerable luck and happened to be employed by a good master.”

“You’re a north-countryman, born north of the Humber !”

He nodded. “Of course, my speech gives me away, doesn’t it ?”

“That—and other things. No, I shan’t tell you what they are. We’ve got years and years in front of us to pay compliments.”

“You’re staying here over tomorrow ?”

Claudia shook her head. “My dearest, how can I ? You forget that I’ve got my business in Town. No, I must go up on the early train tomorrow morning. Seven-forty, I think it is. You can think of me in my office by ten—or soon after—hard at work.”

“You’re certain ? Then”—he laid his hand on hers, and she knew that its firm pressure gave her a sense of security—“do me a great favour. Don’t tell anyone—about us—today. If you do we shall have to answer questions, and drink healths, or watch other people drinking ours, and—oh, it will all be difficult. Let’s keep our lovely secret for one day, my darling. I’ll go and talk to your mother tomorrow. And may I come up to London on Saturday afternoon, when we’ve got all the machinery packed and put on the train ?”

"Wonderful ! How long can you stay in Town ? A week ?"

"A week ! That's not possible, with orders from the Show, and a thousand and one things to see to. No, I must go north on the Monday morning. But"—as her face fell—"I'll come back on the next Saturday, if you'll let me."

"If I'll let you ! Oh, David—I'm glad you've got work to do. I should have hated you to have been a man about Town, a waster, lounging about, drifting into my office every morning and sipping a glass of sherry, until I should have begun to think you came for that and not to see me."

As they walked back to "Bower's Machinery Stand" again, Claudia looked at the man who had said he loved her. He pleased her, she thought, in every way. She liked his tall, spare figure, with the broad shoulders and fine, narrow hips. She liked the way he carried his head, high and with a certain arrogance. He might be—as he said—a nobody, but he certainly contrived to look like somebody. His hands might be stained with grease, and roughened with the continual handling of tools, but they were well shaped, carefully kept, and very expressive. A little smile touched his lips, and she said, suddenly jealous that he should have thoughts which she did not share :

"What makes you smile, David ?"

"I was just wondering what everyone will say," he said. "Your mother, your little girl, Ferdinand Coster, Robert, and Sir Edward."

"I think that I can tell you—if you'll promise not to be hurt."

"Hurt !" David scoffed. "Of course I shan't be hurt !"

"Mama will be very kind, almost sympathetic, and in her heart she'll regret that I'm not going to be Lady Bower. 'Nanda will say : 'Is he a nice man, mother ?' which will give me an excuse for recounting all your virtues. Papa Ferdinand—oh, he'll be very cross, he'll sulk like a naughty child, and finally he'll tell me that he only wants me to be happy, and everything will go swimmingly. Robert will be rather off-hand and pretend that he knew all along, and Edward—well, he'll behave exactly like mama, and think the same things. There !"

His face clouded a little. "It's not going to be terribly easy,

is it? You've got so many ties—your work, your father-in-law—everything."

"It's all going to be perfectly simple, if we both exercise a little patience and common sense. Don't worry, David—I shall begin to think that you regret having asked me to marry you."

"Regret!" He turned to her, his face so radiant with happiness that she realized how nothing mattered to David Betterton except the fact that she loved him. Throughout the afternoon, while she sat with Robert in the little office, she could watch David moving about, and at times knew that he lifted his head and sent a quick glance towards her. It seemed to her that her love for him was something so real, so strong, as to be almost tangible, that it possessed form, shape, breadth and height. David, Fernanda and Robert—her real world. In those three, all her hopes were centred, on them her future depended.

That night they dined with her, Robert, David and her mother. She had chosen the dinner with great care, had ordered the manager to send to London for whatever he could not obtain in the town, and it amused her to watch her mother's face of astonished incredulity as course succeeded course. A cream soup, admirable sole, roast sirloin with Yorkshire pudding, apple tart and Wensleydale cheese; a dry sherry, Niersteiner Hipping, Château Yquem and a port of '54.

"Well, mama, was that up to standard?"

Charlotte, sipping her port, set down the glass with care. "My dear, very nice, but—scarcely original, was it?"

"What do you think, Robert?"

"What's the idea, Claudia?" he asked. "To bring the Broad Acres to Kent, eh? Very good indeed—most successful."

"Ah hate ter tell thee, lad, what trouble it gave me!"

"Claudia, darling, please!" Charlotte shook her head. "One doesn't say these things!"

"Nay, theer's no harm i' admitting that I spent a fairish bit."

"Not when you spent it to such good purpose," Robert agreed.

When Robert went to speak to a friend, and her mother had

been safely attended to her hired carriage, Claudia turned to David.

"Take me out on to the terrace, I'm—what's our own word?—I'm maffled in here."

Standing in the moonlight, with the quiet gardens stretching away before her, Claudia drew a deep breath. "Oh, London's going to be very stuffy after this! David, did you appreciate my dinner? I planned that two days ago. I thought that it might show you how I admire everything Yorkshire, prove to you that I don't spend my life eating oysters and drinking champagne, in fact—I thought that the dinner we've just eaten might help to—bring you up to the scratch!"

"I didn't need much bringing, did I?"

She laughed. "More than you realize, perhaps. I worked very hard to get you, my dear."

They stood there on the quiet terrace, with the softness of the night wrapping them round, talking very little, only conscious that they were both content. From time to time one of them spoke, the other answered, then they were silent again.

"I wish that I had more money," David said suddenly.

"How much does Edward pay you?" Claudia saw no reason for beating about the bush, she wanted to know, there was no other way of finding out, so she asked directly and simply.

"Me? Six hundred and a percentage of two and a half on all my inventions sales."

She nodded. "I think on the new self-binder he ought to increase that. Ask for five per cent on it, David, and a lump sum. If he won't, tell him that Coster's are going to finance you, and start on your own."

"Nay," he laughed, "I'd not do that, love. Edward's been too decent to me to have me play that kind of game. But I love you for thinking of it, just the same. I suppose"—a little wistfully—"you make a good bit more than I do."

"A couple of thousand—but"—quickly—"I've big expenses, remember."

"I'd not like to think that I was going to live on your money," he said.

"My dear, don't be small-minded. You're not going to live

on my money, you're going to live on what you earn yourself, only you won't object to me paying my share of everything, will you? You're going to marry a working woman, and it's going to be a real partnership!"

He caught her to him, holding her very tightly. "God, you're a grand lass," he said. "There's a width and generosity about you, there's a clean openness, a spaciousness, that reminds me of the dales and the dale country."

"That's the nicest thing you could have said to me," Claudia told him. "I don't want our marriage to rely on being in love, love-making, and a kind of sentimental drunkenness from which we're certain to wake—stone cold sober—one day. I want us to build on a real foundation, one that all the seas can't sweep away. Don't think that I don't love your kisses, that I don't want a lover, a sweetheart. I do. I'm the most sentimental woman alive, but I want to be able to shake hands as well as exchange kisses."

He held out his hand and she laid hers in it. "There," he said, "we've made our bargain, and shaken hands on it. Now, lovely Claudia, kiss me!"

"I'm jealous," David whispered. "I'm small-minded enough to be jealous of all the other men who have ever kissed you."

"No one has ever kissed me—like this," she said. "Only two men have ever kissed me, except my father and Ferdinand Coster—one was my sister's husband, who had his face smacked as a result, the other was my husband. Believe me"—and he felt her body stiffen in his arms as she spoke—"he never kissed me as you have done. He kissed me only as a man kisses the woman he—desires."

"Don't think that I don't desire you," David whispered. "I do, God knows I do. Only I'd not have you think that any one side of your love mattered more than another. I want—everything—mental and physical love from you. I want children—our children. I want a home and a wife who is everything—companion, partner, sweetheart. Oh, Claudia, we will be happy, won't we?"

"I can't imagine that I could ever be happy without you now."

While the air was still fresh and cool, he saw her into the

train the next morning, and then walked back to his room at Mrs. Marsden's trim villa, to write his first love-letter. At breakfast, which they had alone, for Charlotte never came down before luncheon, he told Robert of his engagement. Robert, a coffee-cup half-way to his lips, stared, then laughed.

"Stolen a march on them all, eh, Davy? I'll tell you one thing, you're a lucky fellow, and"—more seriously—"Claudia's a lucky girl. 'Pon my soul, I don't know when anything's pleased me more! Have you told mama? Not yet? Going to tell her this morning? That's right, get it over. I'll get her to see you before luncheon, there's nothing doing at the Show this morning. I'll slip down there, and come back when you've got it all over."

For the rest of the morning David Betterton wandered about like a restless spirit. He walked down to the show-ground, then, certain that his watch was slow, dashed back to the house, only to find that he could not expect his interview for another half-hour. At last Charlotte Marsden descended the stairs and entered the sunny breakfast-room.

She had heard Robert's news with a certain disappointment. Certainly young Betterton was a pleasant enough fellow, lacking perhaps Robert's charm, or Edward Bower's position. Vaguely she wished that Claudia might have accepted Edward, it would have been nice to refer to "my daughter, Lady Bower"; or that she might have married Gerald Broom, and one day been Lady Hartland. Still, if the dear child was happy . . .

"Sit down, Mr. Betterton," she said. "Robert has told me your news. I have always trusted Claudia's judgment, and I see no reason why I should not trust it now. You're very fond of her?"

The tall young man, with the rather curly red-gold hair, smiled. "That's putting it very mildly, Mrs. Marsden. I'm only afraid that you'll think she has made a very poor choice."

Charlotte pursed her lips. She had not the slightest intention of allowing this young man to believe that Claudia could not have done better for herself.

"Oh, scarcely that," she said. "I shan't conceal from you that a girl as good-looking, as attractive and as fortunate, financially, as Claudia, has had many opportunities. She

might have made a more spectacular marriage, but if she is happy, then—quite honestly—so am I.”

“I think that one of my chief recommendations in her eyes,” David said, laughing, “is that I come from the north.”

“Indeed. Yes, she loves the north. I lived there for over twenty years, and hated it. Mr. Betterton, I was never really warm during that entire time. Where do you come from?”

“My people—well, so far as I know, that is—came from Marbury. That’s only about five miles from where I work now, at Bower’s. I left there when I was a little chap, I suppose. I went to live in Cheshire, with an uncle and aunt.”

She was sympathetic at once. “Then you lost your parents when you were quite young, poor child.”

“I can’t remember my father at all,” David said, wrinkling his brows as he always did when he tried to concentrate deeply on any subject. “I went to Cheshire after my mother died. I can just remember her, she was always laughing, joking with me, with everyone—very kind and always ready to give me pennies to spend, when she had them, for I fancy we were pretty poor.”

“Betterton isn’t a name I know,” Charlotte said. “We used to live in the West Riding. Betterton,” she repeated, trying to recall anyone who bore the name.

“Well—” he hesitated, then went on firmly—“I’ll be quite frank with you. I don’t even know that my name is Betterton—honestly, I don’t think it is. All I know is that it was the name of the uncle with whom I went to live. I was always called—David Betterton.”

“Oh, really.” Charlotte stiffened instinctively. What a pity that Claudia, with her chances and opportunities, should have chosen a young man who, probably in addition to his lack of worldly goods, lacked a father—at least one who was recognizable. “Of course, you told this to Claudia?”

“Naturally, and, being Claudia, she said that it didn’t matter to her; names didn’t matter, she said, and added that she had no intention of routing out my family history.”

“Quite, quite.” She was growing a little flustered. “That is exactly the kind of thing Claudia would say. Unfortunately

these things have to be faced, Mr. Betterton." Then, with sudden irritation, "Oh dear, it's so much easier for a man to discuss these matters. Have you no other relatives from whom you might make inquiries?"

David shook his head. He was finding the interview difficult, it was unpleasant to have to admit that he had doubts as to the legitimacy of his birth, doubts which he had tried to argue away, and never quite succeeded in dispelling.

"I remember my grandfather," he said. "An old man who lived either in or near Marbury. He was a preacher of some kind, a queer, bad-tempered old fellow called Blenkiron. I never saw him again after I went to Cheshire."

Charlotte Marsden sat stiffly upright in her chair. Had David been more observant he would have seen that the colour had drained away from her cheeks. Only with difficulty did she manage to ask in a voice which was level but utterly expressionless :

"Blenkiron? An old man, you say. Tell me more about him. A preacher of some kind—Mr. Betterton, would you open that window a little more, the room seems terribly close. What? It is wide open—very well, it must be my imagination. Go on, tell me more about this grandfather—these old preachers are always so . . ." Her voice trailed off into a vague murmur concerning preachers and their ways.

David leant back in his chair, his strong, brown hands on his knees, his eyes screwed up a little as if he tried to peer into the mists of the past years. Charlotte, watching him, pressed her handkerchief to her lips, noticed the red-gold of his hair, the intense blue of his eyes, and knew that her whole body shook with apprehension.

'It can't be true—it mustn't be true,' she thought. 'My poor Claudia!'

"I think that I only saw him twice," David's measured voice was saying. "The first time is a very early memory. He was angry with my mother for something she had done—or not done. I know she laughed a good deal—she had a very hearty, free laugh, I remember. He went out and banged the door, and a plate fell off the dresser and smashed to bits on the floor of the kitchen. Then the other time"—his voice lost its slight

tone of amusement—"was at my mother's funeral. He held my hand as we walked behind the coffin. He was angry then, too. Do you know how it is with things that happened many years ago?—they get like dreams. You can remember a bit here, another bit there, and yet the whole story in its entirety evades you. Yet bits are so vivid. I remember that it was a cold, rather windy day, and that I had a new black suit—rather tight under the arms. I know, too, that someone told me that my mother had died because my baby brother had been born, and that he was in the coffin with her. I can see my grandfather"—the blue eyes were staring past Charlotte, as if he gazed into the past—"stopping the men who carried the coffin and leaving me, to go and shout angrily at some man who was at the roadside. He was terribly angry, I was frightened, and rubbed my tears away with my knuckles. I remember that."

"But—" Charlotte moistened her lips—"but why was he angry?"

"I don't know. I think that I regarded it as quite natural that he should be—because I had never seen him anything but angry, you see. I think he spoke to a tall man, who had a woman and a child with him. I'm not certain about the child, but I know there was a woman there. Then—the rest is a blank, and I was in the train going to Cheshire, where they were very kind to me. My aunt gave me some plum cake, and it was very good, with lots of fruit in it."

"They are still alive—these kind people?"

"No, they died two or three years ago, within a couple of months of each other. They never talked about my father—or my mother—except to say that she was a pretty girl, and full of life. I just gathered that my father was above my mother in station; I fancy he was a well-bred ne'er-do-well, and they wished him to be forgotten."

Charlotte nodded, her forehead was damp, she felt that she was suffocating, and yet she knew that she must pursue her questions. She must make certain, it was unfair to leave anything unasked which might prove her terrible suspicions to be wrong.

"Would you ring the bell, please?" she asked. "We might tell them to bring in the sherry, I think." When the maid

entered, she said, "Collins, sherry and biscuits, please, and bring me my smelling-salts, they are on the little table at my bedside."

"I'm afraid that all this long story is worrying you," David said. "Shall we leave it? There'll be lots of other times to talk of these things."

"No, no," she protested, "I'm not tired in the least. It's only rather hot this morning. Tell me—and please don't resent this question, as Claudia's mother I have a right to ask it. Do you think that your parents were legally married?"

He considered the question gravely for a moment, then said: "Honestly, I think so, because you see my mother died at the birth of the second child. I don't think it was just a question of a village girl—going astray with a local squire or something of that kind. I think that they probably ran away and got married, that he left my mother, who came back to Marbury, where he returned to her some years later, and then she had her second child. I have examined the registers of most of the churches round Marbury—Brigend, Seston, Marlingly, even over to Hartburn, and there is no record of any Blenkiron being married in them."

"But your birth certificate?"

"I have never seen it. I take it that I was born after my father and mother left the place. Mrs. Marsden, believe me, if I have no legal father, if my poor mother was—led away, it won't make me anything but loyal and kind to Claudia. Don't let this prejudice you against me. It won't make me work less hard, be less devoted to your daughter."

Charlotte passed her hand over her eyes. "No, of course not. But there must be a record of the funeral of your mother, Mr. Betterton. Have you seen that? That might help you."

"I don't know for certain where she was buried," he said, trying to restrain himself from showing impatience at her insistence. "I went to Marbury, there is nothing there, and at Marlingly—where old Mr. Kennedy is vicar—the register of deaths and burials, so he told me, was full many years ago. When he came to Marlingly, the register was new, and he never saw the older one. Lost, destroyed, burnt—who knows? They were not always very careful of these things, years ago."

The door opened and Robert entered, followed by Collins with the sherry. His arrival was like a burst of sunshine, the tension seemed to relax, and David heaved a sigh of relief.

"When I saw Collins with the sherry," Robert said, "I felt that the worst must be over. Now, let's drink David's health and happiness—and Claudie's with his. Bless them!" His eyes were moist, and his good-looking face wreathed in smiles.

"There you are, mother—"

"No, not for me, Robert," Charlotte said, almost sharply. "I don't like it. You and Mr. Betterton can drink it."

"But you must wish 'em luck, darling!"

"I do, I do," she said. "I wish you both all possible happiness." As they stood there, those two young men, gravely clinking glasses and sipping the sherry—sherry which, Charlotte remembered, Claudia had sent from Coster's, the scene struck her as tragic and horrible. Her son, and his brother, who loved Claudia, his half-sister. As she watched, she wondered why she had never noticed the likeness between them—the same bright hair—the hair which had made Thomas Marsden so attractive as a young man, when he came to her in this very town—the same blue eyes and clear skin, though David's was more deeply tanned than Robert's. It seemed to her that, as they stood facing each other, the fact that they were brothers was apparent, so apparent that she wondered how it could have escaped being noted by Claudia, by herself, by everyone! Brothers—brother and sister—Claudia and David—David Blenkiron. She shuddered, then began to laugh helplessly and wildly.

"Mama, mama, you're ill!" Robert was at her side, his arm round her.

"No, Robert, no," she gasped. "It's nothing—nothing. The room is too hot, I'm tired—my head aches—help me to the door, I'll go to my room."

"Let me send for the doctor!"

"No, I tell you, no!" The tears were pouring down her cheeks, and she beat his arm with her hands, wildly. "Let me go, I tell you. I'll lie down—have luncheon—forgive me . . ."

When Robert returned he said that she was lying on her bed, and that Collins was with her.

"Kind of hysterics," he said. "I've never known mama like that before. Perhaps talking business was too much for her."

"Hardly talking business," David said. "I'm afraid, poor lady, that she is bitterly disappointed that Claudia is going to marry a man who has no particular family, no money—I don't blame her, Robert, believe me. If Claudia were my daughter, I don't know that I should welcome David Betterton with open arms."

"Get out with you! David Betterton's a damn' good feller, and we're all jolly glad to have him in the family. Who are we, anyway? Impoverished county, and scarcely that! Come on and let's lunch, I'm hungry."

Upstairs, Charlotte Marsden lay on her bed, sobbing quietly. Her simple, essentially kindly mind rebelled at the thought of the unhappiness which Claudia must suffer. "The third and fourth generation . . ." she whispered. "Oh, Thomas—why did you bring this on us all? What has Claudia ever done to deserve this? It's cruel, cruel. And tomorrow—I must tell her."

She sat up in bed, her hands clenched round her knees. "Tomorrow! Today! This horrible thing must end. . . ."

She got up, packed a bag, dressed, and when she heard the front door close behind Robert and David, rang for Collins.

"I have to go to London this afternoon," she said. "I was a little disturbed at that—that queer attack which I had just now, Collins. Mrs. Coster begged me, when she was here, to see a specialist in Town. When Mr. Robert comes back this evening, don't alarm him." She tried to smile, and felt her face stiff, felt conscious that the smile was a ghastly failure. "I'm going to ask you to tell a—white lie for me. Say that Mrs. Coster telegraphed to me to go up for the opera this evening—she has a box. There"—again that stiff, unreal smile—"send for a cab to take me to the station, Collins—and remember, you and I are conspirators!"

CHAPTER TEN

CHARLOTTE MARSDEN sat in the corner of the carriage on her way to London and Claudia. She sat with her hands folded on her bag, looking exactly like hundreds of other Victorian ladies ; wearing a little good, if old-fashioned, jewellery, her grey eyes blinking from time to time as the landscape sped past, her lips tightly compressed. Though outwardly she seemed sufficiently composed, her whole spirit was in a turmoil. What should she say to Claudia, how could she break this news that was more than merely terrible—it was horrible ?

By the time she arrived at the London terminus, all her calmness had vanished. As she walked along the platform she knew that her legs shook under her, she felt feeble and uncertain. In the rattling four-wheeler, she sat twisting her handkerchief, her face white and twitching spasmodically. Arriving at Portland Square, she realized that she could not either hear or understand what the red-faced cabman demanded as his fare, and hastily handing him half a sovereign she mounted the wide steps and leant heavily against the Corinthian pillar of the porch.

Mrs. Coster, the butler told her, was expected almost immediately. Mrs. Coster had telephoned from the office to say that she would be home early. Mr. Coster was away from home ; he had been to Matlock Baths for several days, and was expected the following morning or late this evening. Would Mrs. Marsden wait in the drawing-room ? Should he send for Miss Fernanda to amuse her until Mrs. Coster returned ?

Charlotte moistened her dry lips. "No, thank you. I'll wait for Mrs. Coster. The train—has given me a slight headache."

He was respectfully sympathetic. Might he send for some sal volatile, or perhaps a little liqueur brandy ? Charlotte,

almost unable to speak, shook her head. He considered, then said with a slight air of deprecation: "I suggest, madam, that there is nothing more beneficial for these distressing train headaches than a cup of tea. Might I order tea for you?"

The tears rushed to her eyes. She sat dabbing them away with her scrap of a handkerchief. A cup of tea! It seemed, at that moment, the only thing in the world which offered even a semblance of comfort.

"I should like that. I really am rather tired, I think."

She sat there sipping the hot, fragrant liquid, conscious that her frayed nerves were soothed and quietened, feeling that she was mistress of herself once again. As she congratulated herself upon her improved condition, the door opened and Claudia entered. Charlotte's self-control left her and she rose, holding out her arms, crying weakly: "Oh, Claudia, my darling—my own girl, what are we to do?"

She felt Claudia's strong arms round her, heard Claudia's firm, strong voice saying: "Mother, dearest, what is wrong? Tell me—what has brought you to Town? There, sit down, my pet. Tell me—it's not Robert?"

"No, no, Robert is well—they're all well."

"You've talked to David?" Charlotte heard how her voice softened when she said his name. "You like him?"

Charlotte made a supreme effort, the sweat stood on her forehead, and her teeth pressed on to her lower lip to still its shaking, until the blood came.

"Mother—tell me what is wrong. I can't bear this," Claudia begged.

"David talked to me this morning, Claudia. He told me all about his family—as much as he knows, poor fellow. It was . . ."

She heard Claudia draw a deep breath, as if a load had been lifted from her shoulders.

"My dear, that's all right. I know it all, myself. He told me, too. There's nothing to upset yourself over. I imagine that he's illegitimate—well, I don't care. It's a purely personal matter, no one need know. You've been upsetting yourself over that, you poor, silly darling. Oh, what a silly, conventional

mother I've got ! Now let's have more tea and forget it all. I'll ring for Fernanda, she'll make you laugh."

She turned to ring the bell, but Charlotte caught her skirt, and almost screamed : "Claudia, wait ! That's not all ! I know who his father was. I remember his mother's funeral. You were there, too, only you've forgotten. I remember his grandfather cursing the man who was his father and the father of the baby who lay in the coffin with its mother. I saw David then, a little boy in a cheap black suit, crying. . . ."

She saw that Claudia was watching her intently, heard that her breath came quickly, as though she had been running, felt the cold stare of those hard blue eyes.

"Yes ; go on, mama."

"David's father was . . ." She stopped, twisting her hands together in agony. "Claudia, I can't bear to tell you—it's horrible."

"Don't tell me," Claudia said. "I know—now I understand why David so often reminds me of Robert. My God ! How —*horrible*." She walked to the window and stood there in silence, her tall figure outlined against the light, motionless. Charlotte cried softly. After some time, she felt Claudia's hand on her shoulder.

"Mama, you must tell me all about it. Tell me exactly what David said, let me ask questions, there might—might—be a chance that we're mistaken. Tell me about this funeral —everything."

"My darling, it's so painful !"

"I can bear it, and you must try to, mama. Now, every word. . . ."

Slowly, faltering again and again, checked by Claudia's brief, sharp questions, Charlotte repeated the story. She told of the funeral, of the curse which old Blenkiron had laid upon Thomas Marsden, of all that David had said and of her own conviction that he was her husband's son.

"Poor mama," Claudia said softly when the story was ended. Then : "Does David know ? Did he realize what you thought ? You told him nothing ? He doesn't suspect ? Ah !" She drew a long sigh of relief. Her lovely face was grey with pain, her mouth quivered a little, but her voice was firm,

her blue eyes hard. She looked the embodiment of cold determination.

“David mustn’t know, mama. It’s not his fault. There’s no need for him to know that his mother was a harlot, or that his father was a lecherous blackguard. That’s the only thing that I can do for David now—keep this from him. Let him go on thinking that his mother was a light-hearted young woman, and his father some gentlemanly ne’er-do-well. Why not? He’ll think badly enough of women by the time I make him believe that I’ve only been amusing myself.” She smote her hands together fiercely. “My God, what have either of us done that we have to go through this? I can’t even look on my love for him as a clean, lovely thing. It’s foul, horrible, unnatural. How could either of us have known? And now, when I do know, why can’t I stop loving him, automatically? I *still* love him, I can’t help myself—even though I know that it’s filthy, degrading—almost unclean. It’s so damnably unfair, it’s such a devil’s trick for fate to have played on us both.”

She began to pace up and down the room, her long skirts making a whispering noise as they trailed over the thick carpet. Her mother, white-faced and wretched, listened to the hard young voice, thinking: ‘My dear, my Claudia, if only I could help you. If it would help you for me to tell you what I went through when I found out what kind of a man I’d married—I’d tell you. It wouldn’t help you. Nothing can help you in this. You’ve got to stand alone.’

“All this morning,” Claudia was saying, “all last night—when I lay in bed I was planning, thinking. What a wonderful life we were going to have together! I could finance his inventions, I could stand by him when things went wrong, when disappointments came. I was going back to Marlingly—there would be children—boys with David’s hair, with David’s broad shoulders, girl’s with blue eyes and soft cheeks. What am I going to say to him? I’ve shown him so terribly plainly that I love him. I’ve never pretended. I let him know that I wanted his love as much as he wanted mine. I threw all my cards on the table, and let him know that he was the only man in the world for me. I let him hold me in his arms, and I knew then that every bit of me wanted him, that I longed for

him to take everything—I desired him as he desired me ! Now I must pretend, I must act, be someone who isn't Claudia Coster at all. My poor David, it's going to hurt you so damably. My brother ! I've thought of him as my husband, my lover, my children's father ! Every dream, every thought of the future that I've had—adds to the filth of it all !"

"Claudia, my dear—don't, don't !"

"How can I help it ? How can I sit down and take it calmly ? Haven't I always cursed and sworn and lost my temper when little things went wrong ? Now—facing this hell on earth, there seem no words left ! What did Blenkiron say ? The name should be wiped out—forgotten—no one left to make men remember Thomas Marsden. God, I'll help to make that come true ! I'll start Fernanda on a new line. If she has sons they shall look at life differently. They shan't bring bastards into the world, and leave other people to reap the whirlwind. They shan't sow their wild oats, they shan't see life, they shan't think it's part of a gentleman's education to betray women. They shall learn to call these things by their right names—lechery, indulgence, whoremongering !" She lifted her hands, as if her agony shook her. "How I hate the man who was my father—and David's ! My only hope is that at this moment he is suffering the pains of hell as I am doing—no, half as much would satisfy me. Blast him, Lord, blast him ! Damn him to all eternity ! Bind him fast in chains to burn in eternal fires ! Look what he's laid on both his son and his daughter—the stain of incestuous love. That's what I've been guilty of—what I am still guilty of. That's what will be with me all my life. Mama, don't let me think. I shall go mad. It's not only the pain of losing David, the knowledge that I must hurt him, it's the realization that we've both been cheated, robbed, tricked by the—the man who was our father."

Later, still pale, but calm, Claudia came into her mother's room. "That's right, mama, stay in bed this evening. No, I shan't be lonely, father Ferdinand is home. I'll tell them to send dinner up to you. You're not to worry or upset yourself, darling ; only one thing I want you to promise me—to swear on everything you hold sacred—" her voice shook for a second, then went on firmly—"that you will never tell this awful thing

to David, Robert—anyone. It belongs to you and to me. No one else must ever know. You understand?"

"I understand, Claudia."

"You swear never to speak of it?"

"I swear."

As he sipped the port which was so bad for him, Coster stared at his daughter-in-law, his bushy white brows drawn together in a frown.

"You don't look well, Claudia. You're white, your eyes are heavy. Is somesing wrong, please tell me?"

She managed to laugh: "Now that you're safely home—nothing. I don't think gadding about suits me—I shall stay at home in future."

"Ah—then you didn't enjoy the visit to Tunbridge Wells so much. Well, it's a dull hole. Once I was there with my poor wife."

Claudia rose and, going to where he sat, perched on the arm of his chair, her arm round his shoulders, so that her face was not in his line of vision:

"Your clever Claudia," she said lightly, "has been making rather a fool of herself. She's not quite as clever as she thought she was."

"Ah! Tell me then. . . ."

"I met a man there, thought that I liked him, then thought that I loved him—well, now, back home again, I realize that I can't marry him, and so I come to you to help to get me out of the silly mess I got myself into."

Coster caught her hand, and pulled her gently forward so that he could see her face.

"Not so clever as you thought, maybe," he said gently, "but certainly not as good an actress as you pretend to be. Why not tell me the truth?"

For a moment her face quivered, then became calm again.

"I can't—you must believe that," she said—"I can't."

"Very well. What do you want me to do, please?"

"See him when he comes on Saturday, tell him that I can't marry him, that I realize I have made a ghastly mistake——"

"You don't ask me to say that—you don't love him."

"No," she said slowly, "I don't ask you to say that."

So when David Betterton arrived at Portland Square, he was shown into Ferdinand Coster's library, where he saw an old man, with yellow, parchment skin, a silk skull-cap on his head, and his knees covered with a light camel-hair rug. Ferdinand saw a young man of more than average height, with the sunshine catching his yellow hair, making it shine as he had seen Claudia's shine so often.

"My name is Coster," Ferdinand said. "You are David Betterton."

"I am very glad to meet you, sir. Perhaps Claudia has told you something about me—" he smiled—"about us, that is."

Coster nodded. "Yes, she has told me. Sit down, Mr. Betterton. Claudia has asked me to speak with you. First let me say that this decision has nothing to do with money, position, or any of those things. You will do well, very well, I am sure. Only Claudia feels that she cannot marry you. There, you have it! It was better to say it quickly."

For one moment David Betterton staggered as if Coster had dealt him a physical blow, then, recovering himself, he repeated, as if the words conveyed a meaning too impossible to believe: "Claudia says that she cannot marry me?"

"That is what she told me."

"But—but—oh—" with sudden impatience—"it's impossible. I love her, she loves me, she told me so. It's a mistake, a dreadful mistake."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Betterton."

"What reasons did she give?"

"None," Coster said gently. "And I asked her for none."

"Then, by God, she shall give them to me!" David said, with sudden resolution. "Would you be so kind as to send for her, sir? I can't leave this house without seeing her, without hearing her say this thing herself."

Ferdinand, watching him, thought what a fine figure he made, standing there with his head thrown back, his eyes flashing. Claudia might have done worse. This was a man who might be trusted, a man who could fight, who faced adversity with his head well up.

"Yes, you're right. You shall see her. Please ring that bell. Mind, she'll hurt you, she won't give in because you

plead with her, nothing will move her if her mind is made up. I've known her too long to hold out hopes to you that will not be fulfilled."

David nodded. "I understand ; but if I'm to be dismissed, then she shall do it herself. You see, sir, this isn't a small, unimportant thing—it's my life that I'm fighting for."

"Yes, I understand." Then, to the servant who entered, "Ask Mrs. Coster if she will be good enough to come to me."

There was silence in the big room, once David threw back his head as if he wanted more air, once Ferdinand Coster tapped with his fingers on the desk before him. The door opened and Claudia entered. She turned to David and said, very quietly : "Good morning, David, how are you?" Then, addressing herself to Coster, asked why he had sent for her.

"Because Mr. Betterton demands, and I think justly, that you shall tell him that you have—changed your mind."

"Very well. David, I'm sorry, I can't marry you."

"But, Claudia," his voice was hoarse, he rasped out the words, "I don't understand. Why have you changed?"

"I came to the conclusion that I could never care for you, as a woman ought to care for the man she marries—that's my sole reason."

"You didn't think so that morning at Tunbridge!" he flashed back.

"I know ; I'm impetuous. I can only say again that I am sorry."

"I wonder when you decided against marrying me?"

She did not hear the sudden tone of suspicion in his voice, and answered readily enough : "After I got back here—got back to London."

David's face twisted. "I see—after you had got back to Portland Square ! I thought better of you, Claudia."

"Back to Portland Square—" She stared at him blankly, then the sense of his sneer dawned on her. "What a damnable thing to say, to imagine!"

"The whole business is damnable if it comes to that," he retorted. "I can't blame you ; I didn't realize until I came here myself what you'd be giving up. Still, you've made a fool of

me, all right. What an amusing little incident for your holiday, eh? God, I could kill you!"

There was less anger than utter contempt in his voice as he spoke. His eyes were hard, his mouth twisted and bitter. Frowning, he stared at her as if he blamed himself for having fallen in love with a woman who was so unworthy of affection or admiration.

"That's all you can find to say, the only reason you can give me—that your love wasn't of the right quality! I gave you credit for more imagination. I've one thing to thank you for, I shan't allow myself to be made a fool of again."

Turning to Coster he went on: "You were right, sir. Nothing will move her—indeed, I'm not sure that I want to try to change her now. I'll go, and thank you very much for seeing me."

With a stiff, formal little bow which included them both, he walked out, closing the door behind him. Claudia stood, her hand pressed over her mouth, as if she struggled to prevent herself from speaking. She leant against the wall, her eyes closed, her face so white and drawn that Coster called out:

"Claudia, my dear one, don't! I can't bear it. You love him, he loves you. What is it that has come between you?"

Her eyes opened, and he saw the tears rise in them and rain down her cheeks. She looked at him mutely, her wretchedness apparent. He held out his hands towards her.

"Claudia, tell me."

"Yes," she said, speaking very slowly, as if the words came with difficulty, "I think that I must tell you, or I shall go mad. Father Ferdinand, listen to what I tell you, and then never mention it again to a living soul. You will swear that?" He nodded. "Then let me tell you——"

Slowly, carefully, almost dispassionately, she told him everything, her voice steady, emotionless, almost without expression. When the tale was ended, the old man was crying. She put her arms round him.

"Dearest, don't cry. I can't bear it at all if you cry. You see, there is nothing to be done, is there?"

"You must not see him again—for many years—until this is forgotten. Oh yes, my Claudia, you will forget, so will he,

you are both young. With the years comes resignation, understanding. You will not always suffer this way ; that, I—because I am old myself—can promise you. One thing I shall say : for your own sake, for your own peace of mind, you must marry. No, no”—checking her—“not this month, or next, maybe not this year, but one day. You must have a home, new interests, children. This must not be allowed to live on in your heart, consuming you, making you bitter against life.”

“Marry !” she said. “What a wife I should make for any man, with my mind, heart, every bit of me aching for David ! How could I marry ?”

“Patience,” he said. “Patience, my dear one. Now, we will not speak of this again.”

The weeks which followed were the most miserable Claudia had ever known. She wandered about the big house, tried to become absorbed in Fernanda, in business, in household matters, and always it seemed that she could see David’s cold eyes, hear David’s voice filled with contempt as he told her that no other woman should fool him as she had done. Ferdinand was wonderfully gentle, never ceasing to devise some new plan to stimulate her interest, spending money lavishly on her, begging her to leave London and come away with him to some new scene where her mind might find distraction.

She felt that Ferdinand was the only person to whom she could turn in those days. Her mother, white-faced and emotional, had returned to Tunbridge Wells ; and Robert treated her as he might have treated a stranger. He was installed in Bower’s new London office, with a magnificent suite of rooms, where telephones rang and buzzed all day long. For weeks Claudia said nothing regarding his attitude towards her, then one morning, after a sleepless night, when her nerves were strung to breaking-point, she said :

“Robert, how long are you going to treat me as a stranger ?”

“I feel that there is something entirely strange about you,” he said, very coldly, “when you can treat my best friend as you have done.”

“Might there not be my side of the affair ?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t wish to hear it. To lead him on, to amuse yourself with him, and then throw him over for no

reason except that you changed your mind ! I couldn't have believed it of you."

Claudia sprang to her feet. She was wretched, for weeks she had driven herself so that she might go to bed at night physically exhausted in the hope that sleep might come to her. Night after night sleep evaded her. She had fought and striven to forget David, she had begun to believe that the memory of him was fading, now Robert's cold blue eyes—eyes which were the counterpart of David's—had made all the old pictures spring into life again, had made all the old wounds smart once more.

"I should have thought that your loyalty to me might have made you realize that I had some good and sufficient reason for behaving as I did," Claudia flared at him. "What the devil has it to do with you ? How dare you sit smugly in judgment on me. You've known me all your life, but you take sides against me, ranking yourself beside a man you have only known for a comparatively short time, a man who is nothing to—" She stopped, remembering that Robert was standing by David because they were friends, and wondering if perhaps that blood-tie was not asserting itself, even though Robert had no actual knowledge of it. "I'm sorry, Robbie, I'm sure that you're right to stand up for your friend." Then, laying her hand on his shoulder, she went on, "Don't talk about it any more. I did what I felt—what I knew was best. Just try and believe that, Robbie, will you ?"

He tugged at his little fair moustache, his young face troubled and distressed. "I'll try, Claudie, but it's damned difficult. You see—I—well, I'm so frightfully fond of you both. You're the two finest people I know. Still, I can't tell you how I hate being anything but pals with you. It's like covering up the sun, living in the dark, y'know."

She returned to Portland Square happier than she had been for weeks. She had broken down, Robert's arms had been round her, Robert's voice had comforted and soothed her, and she left his office feeling, for the first time since she had parted from David, that the world was a little kinder, and perceptibly warmer.

That night Ferdinand called her into his library, where he

sat at his desk, papers and documents spread out before him.

“Claudia, could you bear to listen to some business?”

“Why, of course. Something interesting?”

“I think so. Please sit down. I have been in communication with our friend, Edward Bower. No, I didn’t mention it to you, because I felt that you were in no mood for business. His is a fine concern, Claudia. I am interested in it. I have invested quite a substantial sum of money in Bower’s. I am, after Bower himself, the largest shareholder, one might say.”

“Yes,” she said, feeling that sudden sense of chill creep over her, as she always did when Bower’s works and interests were mentioned.

“England is not sufficiently large for Bower’s products,” Coster went on. “It is necessary that they shall be known in Canada, the United States, Australia. These are the great agricultural countries—corn, wheat, barley, oats, hay, all these things are grown in farms miles and miles in extent. It is needful to open up these places, to send someone to establish agencies. Toronto, Ontario, Buffalo, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Cape Town, Johannesburg—each place with a representative.”

“Yes,” she said again; “and are you going to send Robert?”

Coster moved his head from side to side, as if dismissing the possibility of sending Robert. “This was discussed, but Robert has not got sufficient mechanical knowledge. No, the right man will be Betterton. He will sail for Canada almost immediately, he will be in entire charge, and as for his inventions, well, he can invent as well there as here! He might have a permanent address, and we might allow him to fit up a workshop there, with an assistant maybe. These things will arrange themselves. His salary will be excellent—I suggest a thousand a year.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “He will be away for—” he shrugged his shoulders—“who knows—three years, four, six, even ten years.”

Claudia rose and stood beside him; leaning down she laid her cheek against his. “My dear,” she whispered, “you’re very good to me. By the time he comes back again—who knows?”

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

I

"THEY were the most difficult and certainly the hardest-working years of my life," Claudia told Fernanda, as they sat under the big chestnut at Marlingly. "One thing after another, until sometimes I haven't known whether I was on my head or my heels."

She lay back in her deck-chair, her legs crossed, showing slim, silk-covered ankles which even at thirty-six had lost none of their shapeliness. Her hair was as bright as ever, her skin clear, and those brilliantly blue eyes danced and twinkled as if she mocked at the work which had been so hard.

"One blessing, it's prevented my putting on weight as Robert's wife has done."

Fernanda nodded. "That's something to be thankful for. I couldn't have borne to have had a mother who was like a mountain."

"Well, if I had been the type that runs to flesh, I don't see what you could have done about it," Claudia said.

"No," her daughter admitted, "one can't change parents as one can change husbands."

Claudia frowned. "That's an unpleasant sort of remark for a girl of eighteen, 'Nanda. I don't like that sort of badinage about marriage much."

"Sorry, angel." The girl sat up on the short clipped turf, and clasped her hands round her knees, staring up at her mother. She was a charming person, Fernanda Coster, thin, with good bones, small wrists, and a head which was placed very charmingly on her shoulders. Her hair hung in a long plait almost to her waist and, as the sun slanting through the leaves caught it, the colour showed the same red-gold lights as did her mother's. "I want to talk seriously, mother," Fernanda

had married him quite conscious that she did so in order to prevent herself thinking too often and too vividly of David Betterton. True, David had been sent to Canada, he was doing wonderfully well there, the reaper and self-binder had been a tremendous success, and profits at Bower's were soaring with each year. Ferdinand Coster had spoken more than once of Edward's devotion, of his real wish to make her happy, and at last—driven almost frantic by the constant thoughts of David which seemed to increase as time went on—she had accepted him.

"I'll do my level best to make you happy, Claudia," Edward said, his eyes moist with emotion, his voice not quite steady. "I think that Ferdinand will be pleased."

"You know, don't you, that I was in love with someone else?" Even then she could not bring herself to say David's name.

Edward nodded. "Yes, I knew something about it. I don't mind admitting to you that it was that fact which influenced us both in sending him to the colonies. Ferdinand said to me that—well, that you'd never look at me while he was knocking about and you were likely to run into him at any moment."

She looked him full in the eyes. "Oh, father Ferdinand said that, did he?"

"More or less—rather more than less, as a matter of fact."

"Perhaps he was right?" In her heart she thought: 'How like Ferdinand Coster! He tells one story to me, another to Edward, and the true story he keeps a secret. Dear father Ferdinand.'

Coster never referred to David; he listened to her statement that she was going to marry Edward with quiet satisfaction. He gave her permission to spend what money she wished on Marlingly, for Claudia refused to live at Seston. A new wing was built, built from old stones taken from the little farmhouse at Cloddingly, which was condemned by the authorities, and where Claudia had built a more modern place. The old gardens were trimmed and set in order, the lawns were cared for, rolled and watered, stables were modernized, coach-

houses were refitted, and the whole place assumed an air of being cared for and tended.

Ten years later, Claudia Bower, seated under the big tree at the foot of the lawn, glanced back at the house as it lay in the full glory of the July sun. This was Marlingly as she had longed for it to be, this was Marlingly restored and weathertight, this was her home, the place to which she belonged.

II

Her mind went back to her children. Wilfred had been born barely a year after her marriage. She had not wanted another child, but she had known that Edward longed for a son, and had felt it was her duty to try to give him one. She remembered the day he had been born, as the rooks came hurrying back to the tall trees in the evening, when the air was full of the country sounds which she loved ; the lowing of cattle, the sudden bleat of sheep, and the excited clucking of hens. She had lain there, peaceful and content, wondering if this was how her old Vanity used to feel when she lay in a loose box gathering her scrambling, blind puppies to her. Glancing down at the child, she had felt that he was rather like a small puppy, with his eyes screwed tightly shut, his mouth pursed, and making sudden spasmodic movements from time to time. Edward had come in, tiptoeing heavily across the room, breathing deeply as he bent over her.

“It’s a boy——” he said hoarsely. “And you’re both of you doing well ?”

“Splendidly,” she said ; “and there’s no need to whisper, Edward. He won’t hear you. He weighs nearly ten pounds. The nurse calls him a magnificent child. He’ll look more human in a day or two.”

Edward had wiped his eyes, kissed her, praised her bravery, and told her that he was the happiest man in the world. He said, rather as if he were in church : “God bless you, my dearest, God bless and preserve you.”

Then, next day, Fernanda had come to see her, and had been allowed to sit on the further edge of the bed, on condition that she didn’t move.

She had stared at the baby, and curled up her short, fine nose.

"He is an ugly little thing, mummy, isn't he? Will he always look like that? He doesn't take after us, does he?"

"Don't you know that plain babies grow up handsome?" Claudia asked.

"Was I a plain baby?"

Claudia said: "Shut up asking so many questions, 'Nanda, you make my head ache. You're a conceited little pig!"

'Nanda gurgled with pleasure. "But a pretty little pig, eh?"

Fernanda loved to ask questions, and it had been those questions which had made Claudia afraid. She had found some old photographs of Marlingly in a box, and carried them in triumph to her mother.

"Who lived here then, mummy?"

"I did?"

"With Edward—or with my own papa?"

"Neither; I was only a little girl."

"Miss Claudia Coster—was you?"

"No; Claudia Marsden."

"Like Uncle Robert—his name is Marsden. Would his children be called Coster, or Bower or Marsden?"

"Marsden, of course."

"Will there always be people called Marsden?"

Even now Claudia remembered how the child's high treble voice had seemed to carry with it a kind of threat. "Always be people called Marsden?"

What was it the old man, David's grandfather, had said? That the Marsdens should die out, die out quickly, they should be forgotten, unremembered. Claudia closed her eyes, and told the nurse to take Fernanda away, because she was tired. She lay there, with Edward's child at her breast, trying to puzzle it all out. What Marsdens were there left? Only Robert, only that handsome, laughing, beloved brother of hers. Old Blenkiron's curse had almost been fulfilled. Only Robert—Robert Marsden. 'Nanda was safe, 'Nanda was a Coster, the little bit of humanity at her side was safe enough—Wilfred Bower. Edward had suggested Wilfred Marsden Bower, and she had said she would think it over. Now she knew that her

son should never have that name, because it must be forgotten and forgotten quickly. Wilfred Bower was sufficient. Only Robert must be safeguarded.

As she lay there, tired and still weak, her nerves were in a state to become quickly strained, her body ready to respond to her speculations with an increase of temperature. She considered Blenkiron's curse again, remembered that her father had died while still a young man. Harriet was dead; her precious husband had left the district; Claudia heard that he had become a popular preacher. Their children—both boys—had barely survived their birth. She was Claudia Bower, once Claudia Coster. No, Robert was the only person menaced by Blenkiron's curse. Robert must be made safe, should be, she would see to it.

Even after ten years, she could still recall the feverish state in which she lay all that night, brooding over Robert's danger. He might be struck down before she could save him. How that salvation was to be accomplished she had no clear idea, but that it could be, should be, accomplished she had not the slightest doubt.

At the earliest possible moment she had travelled to London, taking the nurse and baby with her. It was curious, and yet significant of Claudia's character, that she saw no further than that the letter of the curse should be nullified. It never occurred to her that if danger existed it existed in the blood of Thomas Marsden's descendants and not merely in the name. Robert was the only Marsden left, Robert therefore was in danger, Robert must be saved.

She called at Bower's offices, watched Robert, with eager, anxious eyes, to see if he showed any sign of ill-health, of growing too thin, of flushed cheeks. Robert, on the contrary, looked magnificent. He was as elegant as ever, his lounge suit was perfectly cut, and he wore one of the new "stand up, turn down" collars which Edward stigmatized as "sloppy". It didn't look "sloppy" on Robert, Claudia thought, it looked rather charmingly negligent.

"What's brought you up, Claudio?" he asked, and she fancied that there was a slight nervousness in his manner. Only last year she had been forced to come to Robert's rescue, when

a young lady—‘for that matter,’ Claudia thought, ‘not so young, and certainly not much of a lady’—had declared that she held incriminating letters to which Robert’s signature was appended. The year before there had been debts—his tailor, his bootmaker and his haberdasher.

“I thought that I’d like to see you, like to see how Coster’s is going on. Have a little amusement. Having a baby isn’t a lot of fun, Robbie, either before or after the event.”

She lunched with Robert at his rooms in St. James’s, she noted the looking-glass stuck round with invitations, she questioned carefully, and Robert expanded and became confidential.

“Life’s a good business, Claudie, but things get a bit difficult at times.”

She said: “I think I know what that means. The trouble with you is that you’re weak, Robbie, damned weak.”

“Oh, I dunno. I shouldn’t say that.”

“No, probably not”—crisply—“but I should. You ought to marry.”

He sat down, stretching his long legs before him, his eyes dancing with amusement. “It’s a case of how happy I could be with either . . .” he said.

“Tell me,” Claudia said, in the same tone that she had always used when they were children and she wanted to wheedle a secret out of him.

“One is Sylvia—and indeed ‘all her swains commend her’—she’s charming, young, and her face is her fortune. Believe me, Claudie, if it really were—she’s a wealthy young woman! The other . . .” He paused, frowned and considered. “She’s charming, too. Vivacious, small, dark—Welsh. Her name is Gwendoline Fluelyn. Her father is Hugh Fluelyn, who makes Welsh Sunshine Soaps. ‘Pon my word, Claudie, it’s difficult. It’s not the money, believe me. Edward pays me well, I’m a biggish shareholder, and at my age I’m on the way to doing very nicely indeed. It’s just that, like the fellow in the song: ‘‘E dunno where ‘e are.’”

“And Sylvia?”

She discovered that Sylvia’s father was a parson, a hard-working chap, with a small stipend and a large family. Something of a Classical scholar. Fluelyn was all right, but, as

Robert said, "not a bit gaudy"—a thoughtful man, well read, cultured, but with one bee in his bonnet. Wales and the Welsh. "Has a place in Wales, Evansmwy. Gwendoline is his only child, and he swears that her husband will have to take the name of Fluellyn or he disinherits her—if you ever listened to such rubbish."

He stopped in his half-laughing account of Hugh Fluellyn's patriotic feelings.

"What's the matter, Claudio? You're not ill, are you?"

"No, not a bit. There, my dear, I must go and get down to Coster's. How's money, Robbie? A cheque make life brighter at the moment? I'll send it to your bank when I get home. Bring the Fluellyns to dinner one evening, will you? I'll arrange it."

And afterwards, she had complained to Ferdinand that Fernanda wanted sea air, and that Wilfred wanted sunshine, and that she herself was tired out. The villa at Menton had been opened, servants sent in advance, and later Hugh Fluellyn and his dark-haired daughter had joined her there. Robert had taken his holidays at the same time, and one evening he had confessed to her that he didn't care a hoot if he did change his name, he adored Gwendoline, and wanted to marry her. They had been married, Robert changed his name by deed poll, Edward gave them Seston for a wedding present, and she had breathed again, because she felt that there were no Marsdens left, and old Blenkiron's curse must have ceased to operate.

III

It had all answered very well. Robert had been happy enough with his Gwendoline, who Claudio always felt ate too much and exercised too little. Their twin sons were born in 1894, and once again Claudio felt that spasm of anxiety, and stilled it again, because after all they were not Marsdens at all, but Fluellyns.

"We thought of calling them Hugh and Thomas—after Robert's father and mine," Gwendoline said.

Claudia pooh-poohed the idea. "Thomas—hideous name.

Hugh—certainly, but not Thomas. Why not another Welsh name?"

"David—that's a nice name," Gwen said.

"Oh, not David—too—too—" Claudia sought for a word—"biblical. Why not Owen, that's Welsh?"

They were christened Owen and Hugh.

It seemed that after Gwen had mentioned the name "David" it was for ever cropping up again. Robert said tentatively that David might come home this year, Edward rubbed his hands and said that David was on the track of inventing a "horseless carriage", and each time she heard it, Claudia knew that she shivered with apprehension. At night she lay awake and wondered if she could bear to see him again, speculated as to what he would say, think, feel if they met. The thing became a nightmare, and she knew that she grew nervous and irritable even with Fernanda.

Old Ferdinand Coster, growing very old and very feeble, constantly demanded her presence in London. Edward was considerate, kindly ; he missed her, that Claudia knew, but he placed no obstacle in her way when she announced that she must go and stay in the big house in Portland Square.

In the evenings, they sat in Coster's library, where the shaded lights of the reading-lamps shed great circles of yellow light, and talked intimately as people can who have lived many years of their lives together.

"I had hoped that you were in smooth water, my Claudia, when you married Edward," Ferdinand said. "He is a good fellow, though once upon a time I was jealous of him for fear he should steal you away. I have learnt that if you want to keep things, you must never tighten your hold on them. That is why you still come back to me when I ask you, my dear. Because I never—after my first mistakes—tried to clutch at you."

"I know," she said; "but what about smooth water?"

"Ah—that. I was thinking of David—"

Claudia said with sudden violence, "I wish to God that I didn't think of him. It frightens me. In the night I wake and wonder what I should do if he came home—as he will come home."

He drew down his thick, white eyebrows, then said : "You would be—honest and decent, my Cludia. That's what you would be."

"I should try. . . ."

"And succeed. Look, Cludia, I am going to preach to you like an old parson—eh ? I have nothing to say about Edward. When men marry, when women marry, they take the risk that their partner may weary, may have made a grave mistake. Divorce—it's a pity ; separations—are a pity, but sometimes they are necessary." He stopped, and laid his hand on hers. "You see I am purposely not going to talk of the—other side ; not going to speak of his relation to you—I am going to leave that for you to think of, if you must. I had rather talk of this man as—a man who once, perhaps still, loved you. Edward therefore took the risk when he married you which all husbands, all wives, take. But—you have two children. Fernanda, my own grandchild, and the little boy Wilfred. You brought them both into the world, you therefore assume responsibility for them. Fernanda is entirely yours, she has no one to whom she can look but you, for I am an old man. The boy—he has his father and you, my dear. See that you don't rob your children of anything which they have a right to demand from you. I am not talking of your committing any sin—that's an ugly word, Cludia, sin, isn't it ?—I am merely thinking of what a foolish thing it would be if for any scruple you left Edward, because, you see, you would be leaving him for a myth. You must never say, 'Because I love David so dearly, I cannot live with Edward,' for you might as well say because you love Robert so dearly, you cannot live with Edward. Ah,"—he held up his hand to check her protest—"I know what you will say—only you must not say it. You have learnt a great many lessons, Cludia, and now you must teach yourself another one, that you have two brothers. Say that very often, and slowly what is not possible will die, and what is possible will grow and live. Love can never be wrong, it is only, perhaps, that in this case the—quality of the love may be wrong."

"I must transmute my love—"

"I believe that you have already done so, but you cannot realize it."

"I wonder, father Ferdinand."

"I don't," he smiled. "Perhaps—and don't think that I am trying to make light of a tremendous thing, my dear—you have done this already, only one clings even to sorrows sometimes." He took her hand and held it very tightly. "Oh, Claudia, I would so gladly, so very gladly, have stood between you and all unhappiness, had it been possible—only it might not have been wise. Your difficulties have made you a very satisfactory person, you know."

In the winter of 1896 Ferdinand Coster died. Claudia was with him, and when she asked if he wished to see Fernanda, he said, with a hint of his old irritability: "No, no, what has Fernanda to do with this business of dying? It's not for children—it's too ugly."

He lay, holding Claudia's hand, very still and, it seemed to her, scarcely breathing. When he opened his eyes at last, it was to look into hers as she bent over him, asking if she could do anything for him.

"You have done everything," he said softly. "Always my dear Claudia. I am not anxious or worried for you—in the future. You will be wise—and kind."

Coster's was hers, the house in Portland Square was hers, with its furniture, pictures and statuary. His death stunned her, she had never realized how close they were, how he depended on her and how she, in her turn, relied on him.

She remembered how Isidore Pinto had come over from Paris for the funeral, bringing his son Henri, whom she remembered last as a bullet-headed schoolboy. Henri had grown, indeed he seemed far older than his bare fifteen years. The crape bands on the hats of both father and son were the widest Claudia had ever seen, their suits were so uncompromisingly black, their handkerchiefs had such astonishingly wide borders. But Pinto was genuinely distressed. Claudia recalled how he had cried without restraint in the dining-room at Portland Square, and how his son had wiped away his own tears which he shed in sympathy.

Queer, she reflected, how business claimed you, even in those moments which were filled with a sense of loss and intense sadness. Ferdinand Coster was dead, but Coster's

must go on, and so they talked of wine, shipping and the necessity for advertising.

A year later young Henri had come to London. Claudia planned to make him manager when his training was complete ; she trusted the family, she believed that the boy was clever, certainly his manners were exceptional. She had watched him change from a French boy who spoke broken English, to a French boy who might have been actually mistaken for an Englishman. His clothes were chosen carefully, he rarely used his hands as an aid to speech—in short, she was well satisfied with Henri Pinto.

These busy years, Claudia reflected, had been years of success. Bower's paid, Coster's had never done so well—Fernanda was well, and Wilfred growing into an exact replica of his father. The shadow which used to darken everything, that shadow which was the realization that David Betterton might return to England, had grown less menacing. Perhaps father Ferdinand had been right—perhaps already she had transmuted her love for him into something which carried no stigma with it.

CHAPTER TWO

I

THE sound of carriage wheels on the gravel of the drive made Claudia look up. Edward had returned from the works. Edward rarely stayed late these days, he felt the heat, and his huge bulk made it difficult for him to stand the atmosphere of the works and the foundries during the afternoon. Sometimes, when work pressed, he would drive back again before dinner for an hour or two. Robert was made of whipcord and wire, Edward said, and never seemed to weary even if he was kept tramping round in the heat all day long.

Claudia rose and walked to meet her husband. She watched Edward get out of the carriage, and thought how exactly like his father he grew. She remembered old Sir James so plainly, walking rather stiffly, his face the same deep scarlet as Edward's had grown of late years. It was a pity he liked such light clothes, she thought, they made him look even bigger than he was in reality.

He met her, stooped to kiss her cheek, then slipped his arm through hers.

"Nice to be home, eh?" he said, panting a little. "The works were like an inferno. How Robert stands it, I don't know. Spends his time rushing up and down to Town, rushing round the works, rushing into the office—beats me!"

He was inclined to grow querulous over the heat and his inability to bear it, he seemed almost to blame Robert because he didn't feel it.

"Come and sit down in the shade," Claudia said. "I'll send for a cool drink for you."

"No, no. They make me hotter. Been swigging iced lemonade all day. Let's have tea. Only thing that really cools you, eh?"

Later, as he sipped his tea, he asked: "Where's Wilf?"

"Bathing with 'Nanda."

"Wish I dare ! Might have a bathing-pool made here in the garden, eh ?"

"We might," Claudia said, thinking : 'But we shan't. I won't have my lawns cut up for a bathing-pool, with glaring electric light all over the place !'

"'Nanda wants to go to London—to study painting," she said.

Edward puffed out his lips. "Painting ! Good lord ! Well, shall you let her ?"

"I said that I would ask you, get your opinion, Edward." She smiled.

He opened his mouth and gave a shout of laughter : "Ask me ! That's good ! Don't you always do as you like ? Bless you ! Let her go, if she wants to, better than growing into a hoyden like Veysey's two daughters. Great horse god-mother's of women ! Yes, let her go if she's set on it. She can live in Portland Square ; Mrs. Haversham can look after her, eh ?"

"Then I'll tell her that you agree ? No, Edward, now do back me up. It's so bad for 'Nanda to know that you let her do exactly what she likes. For once play the stern parent a little—to please me."

"To please you, eh ? I'd do a good deal to attain that end, and you know it. There, they're coming." He waved to the children, who approached them across the lawn. Fernanda's hair was loose, hanging on her shoulders like a shining cloud ; Wilfred's hung damply on his forehead. He came to his father and stood leaning against his chair.

"Pooh !" Edward said—"you're making me hot, Wilf. Move away, there's a good chap. That's better—you smell of damp chickweed !"

Fernanda said : "Chickweed's always damp, Edward."

He grinned. Edward Bower was devoted to both the children, but there were times when he wished that Wilf might have had some of Fernanda's spirit.

"All right, Miss Impudence. What's this your mother tells me, eh ? You want to go to London—to paint. What d'yer want to paint ? Why not start on some of my machines —nice bright blue and white, eh ?"

"I don't think that I'm good enough for that yet, darling," 'Nanda said meekly. "That's why I want to go to London to

study, so that one day I might be good enough—then you can give me a job at the works."

"Umph! No, joking apart, d'you think you've got talent? Who said so? Who the deuce is Kisch? An artist you met in Paris? Funny folks you and your mother meet when I let you go gadding to Paris: don'tcher? Well, I'll promise you ~~one~~ thing, 'Nanda, the first picture you get into the Royal Academy, I'll give you five hundred pounds for. Now then—that's an offer."

"Then, I am to be allowed to go, Edward?"

He blew out his cheeks. "Oh—allowed to go. I suppose so—eh, Claudia? Only mind, no slacking, you've got to work. It's not to be an excuse for racketing about Town, mind. Nothing was ever attained except by hard work, y'know."

"And don't come back here," Claudia said, "with paint in your nails! Or smelling of turpentine, either. Art, if it means dirt, and lack of baths and decent hairdressing, doesn't appeal to me."

A week later they took Fernanda up to London. She begged for a studio in Chelsea. Edward said that he didn't see why not, if that was where these students congregated. Claudia put her foot down. Fernanda could either live in Portland Square, with the housekeeper to "keep an eye on her", or Fernanda could return to Marlingly. Fernanda decided to remain in Portland Square.

In the office at Coster's, Claudia talked to Henri Pinto.

"That's all right, then, Henri—ask your father to arrange for twenty or thirty cases of Courvoisier—1875—to come over, and let me sign the order for the Chianti—oh, it keeps all right in cask. Bottle as you want it. Stick to that Ayala, the Bollinger, and the Clicquot—in the main. It's a big harvest this year—I don't fancy that it's all very good stuff, though. Tell your father to see what's going. Don't get rid of that Möet and Chandon for '97 or '98. Tell him to arrange for that to be set aside for Coster's only. I've an idea about that year." Then changing her tone she said: "Sit down, Henri. I want to talk to you. How old are you now? Nearly twenty. You look older. What's your salary? Four hundred, and commission. Not enough—tell Murchison to enter you for six hundred. Oh yes, I know it's too much for a boy of your age,

but I want you to spend some of it for me. Fernanda is in Town, to study art! It may turn out that she has talent, it may not. Anyway, I don't want her racing about London with a lot of long-haired painters, living any sort of a life. I should like you to take her out sometimes, Henri—do the thing decently. If you want more money, you can have it. I don't want her to lose her taste for decent food, decent society. . Can you manage to do that?"

Henri flushed, his eyes shone. "It makes me very proud, Mrs. Coster. It will be the greatest possible pleasure for me. I only hope that in a lesser degree it will be a pleasure for Fernanda. It is an honour of which I am very sensible, one which—"

Claudia nodded. "That's all right, then. Your one mistake, Henri—you are still apt to over elaborate things. It's—well, it's un-English."

II

What Robert called "a little dust-up with Oom Paul" continued. The old Queen had died, and Claudia wondered if everyone felt as she did, that something very personal had gone. Bower's made more and more money. Robert wanted to go out to South Africa, and Claudia, suddenly panic-stricken that her certainty of having beaten old Blenkiron's curse was wrong, begged him not to and made Edward's health an excuse. Robert argued, said that he felt "out of it", and, lastly, sulked. She watched him tolerantly, not caring particularly. Robert always emerged suddenly from his sulks, and anything was better than that he should go out and die from enteric as young Veysey and so many other men from the north had done. Edward gave enormous sums to charity. Robert—made chairman of one of the big north-country organizations for distributing help to soldiers' wives and children—forgot his sulks and flung himself whole-heartedly into his charity.

"Shouldn't wonder if Robert got a knighthood," Edward said. "Coronation honours, y'know."

Claudia said: "Knighthood, rubbish! If Robert has

anything it ought to be a baronetcy, he deserves it for all the work he's put in."

The Coronation—settled at last, after every old wife and sooth-sayer had wagged her head and sworn that Edward VII would never be crowned. The house in Portland Square opened, redecorated, the old furniture examined, the antiques given places of honour, the Victorian atrocities either sold or banished to the attics. Edward, scarlet-faced and short of breath, followed Claudia from shop to shop, agreeing with everything she ordered, apparently ready for her to spend whatever she wished.

It was a time of prosperity, and he was determined that his Yorkshire hospitality should not be outdone by anyone in England. Claudia spent days at her dressmaker's, and a succession of hideously over-trimmed, fashionable clothes were sent home to Portland Square. No material was allowed to stand on its merits alone—lace, braid, velvet and ribbons must be draped, festooned, stitched wherever possible. Hats were like herbaceous borders, like market bunches of flowers, edged with lace and ornamented with diamond buckles.

Robert Fluellyn and his wife took a house in Mayfair, and for a time both Seston and Marlingly were empty. Fernanda flung herself into the preparations at Portland Square, demanded an unbelievable number of new dresses, and appeared to have lost her first interest in painting.

She sat in the morning-room with her mother, one bright morning in May, and listened to Claudia giving orders to half a dozen people at once. "Miss Stocker"—to her secretary—"send out the invitations for the dance on the twenty-first, see that the flowers are as I ordered them, not as Braston's think they prefer them. Telephone Louise that I cannot get down for a fitting before half past three this afternoon, and tell Clara to send down that lace immediately. Now, Hartley"—to the coachman—"you'd better arrange for the bays to come down from Marlingly, and then with the greys we shall be able to manage. Not room in the stables? Very well; put them out at the livery stables in Regent's Park. What's the man's name? Here it is!—Crowther. The motor-car takes up so much room here! Well, I suppose it's got to be put somewhere, hasn't it? Give me the corn bill, I'll sign it.

"Miss Stocker, ask Sir Edward for the cheque for Hartley, will you? Fernanda, get Henri on the telephone for me at the office—if he's out in the yard tell them to send for him, it's important. Good morning, Mrs. Haversham, you're all ready for us tonight? Twenty—yes. This the menu?"—she glanced down it, nodding. "That's all right. See that there is plenty of ice. Where's Hawkins? The wine for this evening? Yes, Madeira '16, Möet and Chandon 1893—oh yes, it's all right, I spoke to Mr. Pinto about it yesterday. Château Margaux, port—let me see—the '67, and brandy Augier Frère's '63. Now, remember, Hawkins, I don't want that champagne iced to death—oh, and, Hawkins, find out for me about these cocktails—I had some last night. Poison, I don't doubt, but—amusing. Liqueurs—yes, I suppose so, if people care to drink them. That's all. Is that Henri, 'Nanda? Ah, Henri. Good morning. Listen, do you remember that Möet '98? It's all right, eh? You're watching it. I want you to begin to get rid of it—'Coronation Cuvée'—yes. One hundred and sixty-two shillings, half-bottles—well—eighty-six. No, I hate half-bottles, but if we've got them, make people pay! My dear Henri, half-bottles are damned silly, and you know it. I'm surprised at your father! Yes, I shall be down about five. See that they get on with that limewashing in Number Seven. Good-bye."

She hung up the receiver and sighed. "Oh, this business is wearing. Well, 'Nanda, tell me how things are. You enjoyed the dance last night? I thought your dress looked lovely." She laughed. "I can tell you one thing, that nice young Rosleigh is very attentive."

Fernanda yawned. "The chinless wonder! Anything would impress him that had two opinions instead of one."

"Come, he's a nice enough lad." A pause, then, "His father was talking to Edward yesterday."

Without displaying the slightest interest, Fernanda said idly: "About me, I take it."

"About you, my conceited infant."

"I'm not going to marry him, mummy. I haven't the slightest intention of being handed over to Charles Rosleigh to pay for the repairs at his old tumbledown place in Worcestershire. I've got other plans."

For a moment Claudia frowned, her firm jaw showed more clearly. She had liked Rosleigh, she had liked the idea that Fernanda might be married to a man with a family tree as long as your arm. She had made inquiries. He was not brilliant, but he was clean, well behaved, decent—in short a likeable fellow.

“Might I hear the plans ?”

Fernanda smiled, she rose and came to where Claudia sat, leaning forward and rubbing her smooth young cheek against her mother’s.

“Yes, angel, I was going to tell you anyway. I only waited because I know you like to get the lead. I’m going to marry Henri.”

“Henri Pinto ! I’m damned if you shall !”

Fernanda laughed. “I shall be damned if I don’t, because I’ve given him my word of honour that I will !”

Claudia stood up, facing her daughter. “Look here, ‘Nanda, Henri is a good fellow, I like him enormously, but he’s only my manager, and I want you to do better than that. I’m to blame, I suppose—I ought never to have allowed you to come to London and gallivant about with him. I blame myself. I’ll talk to Henri this afternoon.”

“Darling, listen to me.” The girl was not in the least disturbed, her lovely mouth smiled, she spoke with affection tinged with tolerance as if she wished to make everything clear to her mother. “Henri is in the wine trade—so are we. What’s the good of pretending that Edward’s title means anything ? His father got it by handing over heaven only knows how much to the Tories for their fund. You see, really we aren’t anyone in particular, even if we do stink of money ! You were just as much of a figure when you were Claudia Coster of Coster’s, as now when you’re Lady Bower. One must get rid of these old-fashioned ideas about the magnificence of marrying titles and all the rest of it.”

“I see. Has it occurred to you and to Henri that if I sacked him he’d have no means of keeping you ? I could do that quite easily, you know.”

Fernanda’s smile deepened. “Oh no, darling you couldn’t. Some people could, but not you. It would be hitting below the belt, you see. You don’t do that, y’know. Henri’s your

manager, he's a good manager too, you've admitted it a hundred times. He won't manage Coster's less efficiently because he marries me, will he?"

"How old is he?"

"You know perfectly well, mummy—nearly two years older than I am—he's nearly twenty."

Claudia's face cleared, she laid her hand on Fernanda's shoulder.

"Listen, my love," she said. "Play fair with me. I'm virtually father and mother to you. I want honestly to do my best for you. Give me a couple of days to think it over. Tell Henri not to mention it to me today, I'm rushed and driven with these confounded dinners and all the rest of it—let me sleep on it. Is that a bargain?"

"That's a bargain, darling. I promise Henri shan't worry you."

That afternoon, between visiting her dressmaker and going down to Coster's, Claudia attended a reception given by an elderly peer with religious leanings. An important old gentleman, with a thin, straggling beard, and earnest, pale-blue eyes. His voice was gentle, and his genuine love for humanity made Claudia feel kindly towards him, had made her many times subscribe to his multitudinous charities.

He sat at her side, peering at everyone through gold-rimmed glasses which always tilted sideways on his long, melancholy nose.

"I expect you're finding this Coronation season hard work, Lady Bower?"

"In that I imagine we're fellow sufferers," Claudia said.

"It's all good for trade—provides work for the poor people who need it," he said. "Ah, there's young Hanson. That tall fellow over there"—pointing to a broad-shouldered young clergyman. Claudia reflected that you always found the clergy in shoals at Lord Gostred's. "A fine fellow, excellent preacher. I thought at one time of—well, er—of advising certain influential persons to offer him Saint Catherine's in Mayfair. But"—he peered again, near-sightedly, through his glasses—"he's just a leetle young, I fancy. I think that Broom would be a better man. Yes, Broom would be better."

"Broom?" Claudia asked sharply. "What Broom is that?"

"Hartland's brother. I have a great liking for Broom. He's

worked hard, preaches well, he's popular. I think he's the man for Saint Catherine's. It's a—well, er—it's a social parish." He laughed, neighing like a horse. "It's something of a—plum, an ecclesiastical plum, if I might use the expression. There he is—Victor Broom, over yonder, talking to my wife."

Her eyes found the stout, excessively well-groomed figure of Victor Broom, and all her old loathing of the man flared and blazed again. He had grown heavy, portly, though he still remained a dignified and even elegant figure. His fair hair shone, his rather handsome face was beautifully shaved, his whole appearance was that of a man who liked the good things of life, and who took considerable pride in his appearance.

"Tell me about him," she said. Instinctively she registered a vow that if she could manage it, young Hanson would shortly be vicar of Saint Catherine's and not Victor Broom.

"About Broom? He's now at Saint Mark's in Stepfield. He went there in the hope that Crossley would either be moved or retire. There was some muddle, and Crossley remained where he was, so Broom is still only senior curate. He ought to have had the family living, but I gather there was some misunderstanding between him and his brother, Gerald Hartland. Pity! Broom confided to me that he married far too young—married, I gather, a girl much below him in position, with a family who were—well—er—not quite the most pleasant people in the world. The wife died—he was apparently devoted to her, and nursed her with every tenderness. None of the family, except the mother, came near them, although he begged them to come and his wife added her pleading to his. That kind of grief, intensified by the heartlessness of others, would have soured a man less admirable than Broom."

He raised his hand and signalled to his wife to join them, and a moment later Claudia found her sister's widower standing before her.

"I have met Mr. Broom before—many years ago," Claudia said in answer to Gostred's question; then, as the old peer and his wife drifted on to speak to other guests, she addressed herself directly to Broom. "You have a letter for me, I think," she said calmly. "It's been delayed for some time. You might let me have it as soon as possible."

His eyes narrowed suddenly, but his voice carried no trace

of embarrassment. "I don't know to what you refer, Lady Bower." He smiled. "You've made an—apparently—greater success of life than I have done. I hear that Edward Bower could have a peerage tomorrow if he wanted it."

"I think it's likely—only he doesn't want it."

In some queer, ridiculous way, this stout, elegant man made her feel that she was Claudia Marsden, young and shabby, gauche and impetuous, once more. She knew that her clothes were both beautiful and expensive, knew that her dark-blue taffeta-silk dress with its white lace ornaments was the smartest dress in the room, and yet here she was, for the first time for years, at a loss for words and, when she did reply, speaking like a schoolgirl.

"I heard only today—from someone—that Rosleigh's family are quite willing to accept his choice of a wife—you must be very proud."

Claudia frowned. "Rosleigh's family are willing to accept—! You might tell whoever your informant was that people are not asked to *accept* my daughter. Tell them, too, that Fernanda isn't going to marry Rosleigh. It was decided only this morning that she is going to marry Henri Pinto."

The well-marked, rather bushy eyebrows were lifted. "Might I ask whom Henri Pinto is?"

"He's the very fortunate young man who is going to marry my daughter ; he is also—my manager at Coster's. A splendid fellow, who'll make her a decent husband. They'll be married almost at once—probably at Saint Catherine's."

He bowed. "That will give me the greatest possible pleasure—"

Again it was the old Claudia Marsden who spoke : "What the devil has it to do with you ?"

"I have every reason to believe that in a very short time I shall be priest in charge at Saint Catherine's."

"If you believe all you hear—well, you know the rest. Let me remind you again about that letter—I should send it, or I might be obliged to call on you and demand it. Good-bye."

"You fool !" she thought as she walked from the house to her waiting carriage. 'Why couldn't you keep your temper and be dignified ? Rosleigh's family are willing ! Damn their willingness ! Why should his wretched family be willing for him

to marry 'Nanda?' "Drive to the office, as quickly as you can," she ordered.

She fancied that Henri was a little nervous, that he was less ready with his replies regarding the distribution of wine, less certain as to figures and prices. She listened to him with some amusement and, comparing him with Rosleigh, decided that Henri emerged the victor in the comparison. He was tall and slim, he had succeeded in dressing like an Englishman, in speaking like one except when he was very excited, he was integrity itself—yes, Fernanda would do very well. Rosleigh's family were willing to accept Fernanda, were they!

Claudia sat at the big desk in the office which had been Ferdinand Coster's ; she took a cigarette from the big box which stood there, and allowed Henri to light it for her. Then, leaning back, she met his serious eyes and smiled.

"It's all right, Henri," she said. "Telegraph to your father tonight. You'll marry Fernanda at Saint Catherine's, Mayfair, in five weeks' time. Pleased?"

He stared at her, his face very white. "Oh, Lady Bower—I thought—I mean—"

"I suppose the minute that my back was turned 'Nanda told you not to mention it for two days, eh? Well, I've changed my mind. You're a good fellow, Henri—nearly as good a fellow as your father, and he's one of my oldest friends." She remembered that occasion when Henri's father had called to see her in Paris, how his gentle courtesy had helped to restore her self-respect, her self-confidence. "I knew him before Fernanda was born." Then, offering him her hand, she said : "It makes me very happy that you're going to marry 'Nanda. Bless you! Now, get Miss Stocker for me, on the telephone, and come to dinner tonight. No, I know that you were not invited, that's why I'm inviting you now. That Miss Stocker? Give me the receiver. Hello, Miss Stocker—I want an extra place at dinner tonight, next to Fernanda. What? It will throw the table wrong? I can't help that—damn the table! Here's a secret for you to tell Fernanda—she's engaged. The extra man is my future son-in-law. Wait a moment, I might have another man. . . . Throw the table out more than ever? Can't help it, my dear, I've got some business on hand. I'll let you know in five minutes. Right."

She turned to Henri again. "Get me Lord Hartland, Henri—where is he? At his rooms in St. James's—let's see—I have the number—oh, you've found it. Then get me some tea—tell Parker I want real tea, not the blast I've been drinking at the Gostreds'. Got him? That's right, go and order my tea."

As the door closed, she dropped her brisk, rather abrupt manner, and spoke to Gerald Hartland. "That you, Gerry? Claudia speaking. Can you do me a favour? You'll do anything? Splendid! Accept a very short notice and dine with us this evening. Something rather special has happened—'Nanda is engaged. Who to? Rosleigh? My dear, *no*! Young Pinto, my manager. His father is almost as old a friend as you are—and as good. You'll come! On my right, Gerry—where else? Good-bye."

When Henri returned with the tea, hot, black and Indian, as she liked it, he found her leaning back in her chair smoking, staring at the portrait of old Madame Clicquot which hung opposite her desk.

"Have a cup with me, Henri? That's a wise old lady, there. I've often looked at her when I was a little worried, and said: 'Now, madame, tell me what you'd have done?' Somehow, I've always found that half-smile of hers, those bright, twinkling eyes, very helpful. I think that I must give you a partnership for a wedding present, Henri—a junior partnership, of course. I can't have you disputing my orders, or querying what I say. I've been autocratic too long. There—tell Collins that he makes tea far better than they do at Portland Square. I feel a different woman. I came here just a little worried and annoyed—that's gone! There, go and make yourself look particularly nice for Fernanda. Would you like one of my rings to give her tonight?" She held out her hands towards him, hands with fine, long fingers, just a little square at the tips, and having broad palms, the wrists slim and graceful. Henri looked down at the diamonds which twinkled on her fingers, then shook his head.

"Always you are too generous," he said, lifting her hand and kissing it gently, "but you, who understand things—intimate things—so well, will understand that this ring for Fernanda must be mine, paid for by me. It is only right."

Claudia nodded. "Of course! You're a good boy, Henri."

CHAPTER THREE

I

THERE was no doubt that Claudia Bower was behaving badly. She had not been content with upsetting the table arrangements, with introducing two additional men—without partners, either!—but now, with Lord Hartland on her right, she was devoting the whole of her conversation to him, scarcely paying any attention to the man on her left. Robert, tall, elegant and always socially correct, frowned as he watched her, and wondered “what Claudia is up to”. Edward, purple-faced with heat, good food and better wine, blinked his prominent grey eyes and smiled.

“The best-looking woman in the room—damn it, in London. What a wife! What a manager! Making old Gerry Hartland roar with laughing, and it takes some doing to make these ram-rod soldier fellers laugh. The other night at the Apollo—never laughed once. Well, Claudia can do better than the professionals!”

Fernanda, one hand held tightly in Henri Pinto’s under the heavy damask cloth, looked down the table to where her mother sat. How splendid mummy looked, no other woman could wear white as she could. Those puffy sleeves made most people look square, but she contrived to look taller than usual. So like mummy, too, to have sent Stockie to tell her that it was all right about Henri. “I’ve come to congratulate you, ‘Nanda dear. Your mother has just telephoned to tell me that—well, that you’re engaged, darling!”

Gerald Hartland, smoothing his long, bleached moustache, listened to Claudia, bursting into roars of laughter at intervals.

“Whatever took you to Gostreds’, m’dear? Place is always full of parsons—and stuffy as the devil.”

"That's the odour of sanctity, Gerry. I saw your estimable brother there."

"Who? Victor! Oh, Victor and I have finished with each other. Had the deuce of a row. That's why he didn't get the living. Frightfully sick over it."

Claudia, her eyes on her plate, asked: "Wasn't that a little drastic? It's the family living, isn't it?"

Hartland's mahogany-coloured face took on a deeper tinge. "Look here, Claudia, I'm not a religious feller, but I'm hanged if I'll have my wife and my two boys having to be civil to that bounder of a brother of mine. Hanged, too, if I'll have him instructing my villagers in the Creed and their duty towards their neighbour and all of it! No, no!"

"Still—I hear that he's an estimable man, a good preacher. I think it was a mistake to let a personal quarrel influence you in a matter of that kind."

"Look here, Claudia," he leant forward, speaking quietly, "you dunno the whole story, I can tell you——"

"Not now," she said—"afterwards. I must go—Edward is getting restive. He wants the women out of the way. Possibly he has a good story for you."

When Hartland made his way towards her in the big drawing-room, it was evident to Claudia that Edward's brandy had not only been appreciated by him but slightly over-appreciated. Not that Gerry was tight, merely that he was obviously in an expansive mood. Well, that suited her very well. He sat down at her side. "Nice young feller, Pinto. Kind of young feller that's distin'tly likeable. Hope they'll be frightfully happy. No one would think you were 'Nanda's mother, Claudia. Remember the time when I asked you to marry me? By Jove, I was all to pieces when you said no. But I'm very happy with Edith—two splendid boys—everything splendid."

"Except that you're not friends with your brother, eh?"

He blinked his eyes. "'Strordinary you taking such an interest in the man! I thought you hated him."

"I don't like injustice, Gerry!"

"Injustice! I like that! Come somewhere quiet and let

me talk to you. Tell you the story—then I'll accept your judgment. Can't say fairer than that."

"Very well"—she rose—"let's go into the conservatory." As she passed Edward's chair, she laid her hand on his shoulder : "All right, Edward ? I'm just going to listen to some story Gerry wants to tell me. I shan't be long." Edward nodded, laid her hand against his cheek for a moment, and she rejoined Hartland.

Seated opposite her, in a basket-chair, with his thin brown hands on his knees, he began his defence. 'He's dated, somehow,' she thought—'no one wears those long moustaches now, or those choking collars. He looks—what he really is—a smart soldier of the '90's.'

"I won't spin it out too long. I feel pretty certain you'll say that I'm right. There was that business about a letter for you, from y'poor sister. That annoyed me. Something mean, fishy, rotten, there. Victor always swore it had been lost in the post. Rubbish ! Right. I was coming home, always stayed in Paris on the way. Like Paris—but, I swear, on the dead level. Never had any use for that kind of thing—too dangerous in the Army. For me, anyway. Always stay at the 'Royale'. Old-fashioned, but I know it, and like it. Gone down a bit lately. Repainted, modernized—ruined to my way of thinking. My room—first floor—twenty-five. Got to bed, frightful row in the next room—twenty-four. Shouting. Man and a woman. By gad, Claudia, I've done a bit of cursing in my time, but this—it was past everything. Shocking. Thankful I hadn't Edith with me ! I sat up in bed, thought : 'I lay a fiver I know that chap's voice ! Certain I do—who the devil is it ?' I listened"—he bent forward and laid his hand on Claudia's knee. "I tell you, it was Victor's—Victor with a woman ! And a woman—well, I won't insult your ears with telling you what she evidently was ! Then old Merger came running up, waiters, expostulations—it was insupportable. Would monsieur and madame make less noise ? And finally things settled down."

He drew a deep breath, and pulled out a cigarette-case. "Mind if I smoke ?"

"Not a bit. But, Gerry, you couldn't be certain that it was Victor."

He blew out the match. "Just a minute. Just a minute. In the morning I was in the writing-room, getting off my daily page to Edith. Someone came and sat down in a chair near me, ordered a drink. Victor ! I finished my letter—trying to write and think at the same time. Walked round to where he sat, and said : 'Good lord, fancy seeing you here !' He lowered his paper; the feller was in mufti. Well, nothing in that, for I knew that he always had taken his holidays wearing ordinary clothes, said it made a pleasant change to get out of the clerical collar. He was surprised to see me. We chatted, as one does 'When did you get here ? Last night ? So did I. I don't think I shall stay over today. Really, I'm going back to England tomorrow.' Y'know, the kind of silly stuff one does talk. Then I had a brain-wave. Said that I didn't think I'd stay at the 'Royale' again, it was getting too damn' noisy for me. Said that I'd been kept awake half the night by people rowing in the next room. He didn't turn a hair, said that he hadn't heard anything—'But then,' he said, 'I had a small room at the back—on the third floor—number two-seven-eight.' Just then he crossed his legs—y'know the pompous way he does—and dashed if his boot-sole wasn't almost on a level with my eyes. Chalked on it, y'know how they do, twenty-four ! Minute or two afterwards, he cleared out. I walked to the desk, said to Marcel—he's been there for years : 'Who the devil was in twenty-four ? Frightful row. Unbearable !' 'Lady and gentleman, Colonel Broom.' I said that I was certain that it was two men. I'd heard their voices. Finally I bet him a twenty-franc piece that I was right. He turned it up in the book—'Monsieur *et* Madame Victor.' I saw Merger and complained. No right to have such people in the place. He shrugged his shoulders—y'know how they do, these French fellows—said that he hoped I would overlook it.

"The gentleman is a very good client of the hotel. He is a silk merchant and comes here four or five times a year.' I said that I bet he didn't always come with the same lady. Merger lifted his hands, smirked and said : 'Colonel Broom, what would you ? This is Paris—men are men. The hotel manager must always be diplomatic.' So there you are, Claudio, now—d'you blame me ?"

"You tackled him with it?"

"Certainly I did. He blustered, asked if I'd always been so immaculate. I said that I'd never sunk to having a row with a French t—sorry—woman in an hotel. One thing led to another, and—well, we're not on speaking terms. Naturally I don't tell people. . . ."

"Naturally. I wonder what he'd do if he knew that you'd told me."

"I wish that he did know I've told you. It would show him how right you'd always been to dislike the brute. There, I mustn't keep you, I shall have Edward out for my blood."

That night Edward came and sat in her room smoking a last cigarette.

Claudia said: "I believe that you smoke too much, Edward. It's bad for you."

He laughed, his queer, breathless laugh. "How about yourself? I'm all right. So you're going to let 'Nanda marry Pinto, eh? Well, and why not? Good lad, decent clean fellow. I'm pretty pleased about it."

"Titles don't bother you much, my dear, do they?" she asked.

"Me? Not a bit. So long as she's happy, what's the odds?"

Claudia looked at his great bulk, his heavy congested face, his rapidly thinning light hair, with an expression that was almost tender. She had a great affection for this immense husband of hers, she had grown to know and understand him so well. Edward had never been brilliant, Edward was a very successful business man and content to be so. But Edward had a genuine kindness, a real wish that everyone round him should be happy and content. He had never been an exciting husband, but he had been a very gentle and considerate one.

"You put great store on happiness, don't you?" Claudia said.

"There isn't very much else that matters, is there?" he answered, like so many of his countrymen, answering one question by asking another.

In the queer off-hand fashion of hers, which Edward had come to recognize as her usual tone when she was in reality very serious, she said: "Been happy with me, Edward?"

He nodded. Rubbing out the end of his cigarette, because, after all Claudia was right, it did bother his breathing, he said : "Barring the times when I knew you were unhappy—when Ferdinand died, when you lost your mother—I don't think I've had one minute that wasn't wonderful. I always wanted to marry you, y'know, even when you were a long-legged lass with your hair in a plait. You'll never know how nearly I broke my heart when you married Coster."

With her chin propped on her hands, she listened. "How long ago it seems ! I sometimes think that I can scarcely remember Francis."

"Umph." The sound might have meant that Francis Coster was not worth remembering. "And—then David. . . ." He paused, and Claudia tried to prevent herself from stiffening a little as if to ward off an impending blow. Once again it startled her to find how her love for David still lived, what a vivid picture his name could call up. "I felt that was really the end of everything," Edward's breathless voice went on, "only—it wasn't. You were very fond of him, eh ?"

Quite calmly she managed to reply : "Yes, very fond of him."

"But you could meet him again—and not feel too badly ?"

"Yes, of course. Why, is he coming home ?"

"Ought to be home next month. Poor fellow, he's been away long enough. Only if his coming worried you—well, Coronation or no Coronation, I'd take you off to America or some place while he was here."

"My dear !" She wondered if her tone was a little too emphatic, but apparently Edward accepted it. "I never heard such nonsense ! With 'Nanda to be married in five weeks' time—what next ?"

"Nice to sit here and have a talk to you," he said with that inconsequence which seemed to be growing on him during the last year. "Nice and peaceful. Good rooms, aren't they, here ? Room to move about—and I need plenty of room these days."

Claudia felt a certain relief that he had forgotten David and his home-coming, yet it was better to know, for she could school herself to meet him, arrange that he should be invited to the house when there were plenty of other people present—oh, much better to be forewarned.

"You ought to diet," she said to Edward. "You know what Malcolmson told you. You really are terribly naughty."

"Pooh," he gave his wheezy laugh. "A short life and a gay one!"

A short life! The idea terrified her suddenly. Suppose anything happened to Edward—suppose that she was left alone, to meet David alone, with no apparent ties. The thought chilled her, and, rising, she came and laid her hand on his broad shoulder, feeling the smooth silk of his brightly coloured dressing-gown under her fingers.

"Don't talk like that!" she ordered. "How dare you! Edward, how selfish—don't you think of me at all? A short life!"

He twisted round, and stared up at her. "I really believe you'd care."

"Care—of course I should care! I should care horribly. Edward, be sensible, don't overdo things. Surely it's not a great hardship to diet within reason, to cut down those heavy cigars, and wines." She was speaking very rapidly, agitated and distressed. "Once 'Nanda's married, let's go to Homburg or Baden-Baden for a cure, shall we? Be sensible, just to please me."

He caught at her hand and rubbed it gently against his cheek.

"Silly!" He mocked her good-humouredly. "What's the panic about? I'm as right as rain. Only this damned heat tries me. You can't carry sixteen or seventeen stone about with you like a feather. Claudie, you're not crying?"

"Of course I'm not crying," she lied—"if I am it's with temper at your damned stupidity!"

"There, there!" He scrambled to his feet, and put his arms round her. "There, that's all right. I'll begin to diet tomorrow. Drink soda-water and some of that thin German wine that's like vinegar—will that suit you, eh?"

"Just to please me—that's all," she begged.

His own eyes were moist as he answered: "'Pon my word, I didn't know that I mattered so much to you, my lass. Bless you, there's nothing I'd not do for you—and you know it, eh?"

But the next day when Hawkins handed him boiled fish, he

waved it away and declared that he couldn't resist lobster mayonnaise, he couldn't resist new potatoes, or saddle of mutton, or sherry or red wine or the old port which he appreciated so much. He laughed when Claudia remonstrated with him, waved his huge corona and wheezed that there was nothing which rounded off a meal so well as a cigar.

Claudia shook her head. "It's not a bit of use, Edward," she said, "you're only a great baby—a great, big, greedy baby. Still—when finally gout and liver get the better of you, I promise not to remind you."

II

"Get me a hansom, Hawkins—with a decent horse."

Hawkins, too well trained to show any surprise, stood on the steps of the big house, waiting until a hansom with a sufficiently good animal in the shafts should pass.

"I think that this one looks quite passable, m'lady."

Claudia nodded: "He'll do. I want the Clergy House, Stepfield. Do you know it? Well, you can ask."

"Cert'ly I can arsk, madam."

She sat back in the hansom, and tried to plan what line she would take with Broom. She felt excited, confident—people couldn't expect to cheat Claudia Bower and get away with it. She had sworn that she'd make him pay for what he'd done, and pay he should!

Her plans evaded her, she let them drift away from her mind and sat there, enjoying the movement, idly watching the crowds passing in the streets, letting her mind wander. She was tired—all the winter at Marlingly she had entertained, and here in London it was Marlingly over again, only intensified. Now there would be Fernanda's wedding to plan and arrange. As usual she would make all the arrangements, formulate all the plans, for Edward—bless him—never concerned himself with anything that happened outside the works gates.

She was worried about Edward, conscious that despite his huge appetite all was not well with him. The thought of that drove everything from her mind, even made her forget for a time that Edward had told her David was coming home. She

had married Edward Bower relying on her personal liking and respect for him to form a solid basis for their lives together. Edward had been a kind of refuge, a strong tower, a buffer which came between her and the stormy seas through which she had passed when she put David out of her life. She wondered when she began to feel real love for Edward. Affection, respect, liking—all those things, and slowly he had grown to be part of her life, she had come to feel responsible for his well-being as she was for Wilfred's. She recalled the many times when Edward had stood by her, when he had known that she still struggled against her love for David—he had said nothing, had betrayed nothing by his manner ; he had only been a little more patient than usual, kinder or more considerate. She had been grateful, and that gratitude had grown and blossomed into an affection so real, so great, that—as she let her thoughts run on to the accompaniment of the horse's "clip, clop"—she felt that the greatest catastrophe which could befall her would be to lose Edward's companionship and affection.

David—David Betterton—the man she had loved because she could not help herself. After all these years that love remained, and she knew it. She might have been wiser, she reflected, to have made Edward bring him back to England, to have met him frequently, and schooled herself to remember whenever they met that this man was her brother. Edward and Ferdinand between them, so anxious to safeguard her, had taken the less difficult but more cowardly way. There had been no opportunity to learn to regard David as a brother, he had impressed his personality on her as a lover—and in her mind a lover he remained.

Not that the thought of his return frightened her particularly. Claudia, at nearly forty, knew herself and her own powers. She was no longer a girl, starving for love, but a woman—secure, wealthy, and self-controlled. She knew that at whatever cost to herself, however she might be forced to violate her own feelings, she would remain mistress of the situation, and never in the slightest degree imperil the trust which Edward placed in her. Her pride was tremendous, and whatever her heart might dictate, however she might be forced to fight, Claudia would

never allow herself to become an object of commiseration or criticism, in Edward's eyes.

She smiled as she reflected that in spite of that beauty which she had grown to accept, as she accepted her red-gold hair and white skin, she had never known the fulfilment of intense love. Francis—but had that ever been love? Had it not been the impetuous willingness of an immature character to snatch at what offered, to see romance where none actually existed? Anyway, whatever she had experienced with Francis had ended very quickly. David—love, but love which she had been forced to reject, love which was in itself an impossible, monstrous thing—and Edward. She had it in her heart to envy other women who married the men they loved, and were able to spend years of happy companionship with them. No, she'd had everything which the material world could give her, but love—the thing which could not be bought or sold—had evaded her.

"It's made me hard," she thought. "It's made me capable of nursing a hatred—as I've nursed this against Broom, as I have been able to continue hating my father. It's made me willing to wait, and plan—take revenge. It may even have made me a better business woman! Who knows? I might have been a nicer woman—even if I'd been less successful. Poor Claudia, poor David! I wonder if he still thinks me a beast of a woman."

"Clergy 'Ouse, lidy," the driver said through the little trap in the roof.

"This?" She peered out at the tall, dingy-looking house, and didn't wonder that Victor wanted to get out of it. "Very well, wait for me, I want you to drive me back."

She was shown into a room which she supposed was Broom's study. A fair-sized room, with a window overlooking a rather shabby garden. Comfortable enough, with a thick carpet, well-upholstered chairs, one of the modern gas-stoves for heating, pictures, books—even a Tantalus containing three decanters. Victor might live in Stepfield, but he contrived to be comfortable, she decided.

The door opened and Broom entered, his face was slightly flushed, he blinked his eyes rapidly. 'Been sleeping after

luncheon,' Claudia thought. 'Probably eats too much and gets indigestion.'

"Claudia—Lady Bower! This is most unexpected."

She motioned him to a chair. "Sit down, I want to get this over. Don't interrupt me. I'll go straight to the point. Before she died Harrie gave you a letter for me. Oh yes, she did—Gerry saw it, saw you take it out, ostensibly to post it. I never had it—where is it?"

He scowled, his full mouth suddenly drawn down at the corners.

"How should I know? Probably it was lost in the post."

"Then why do you tell people that when Harrie wanted me—I refused to come to her?"

"How was I to know that you didn't get the letter?"

"You might have given me the benefit of the doubt, you might have telegraphed to me, you might have done a dozen things. I suppose the letter was destroyed years ago. You thought that you'd won, hands down. You haven't."

He made a great effort to recover his composure, then said, his voice even once more: "Lady Bower, this is my room, this is the Clergy House; if you are going to become abusive, I shall ask my servant to show you the door."

Claudia, all her old temper rising, leaned forward and snapped her fingers in his face. "That be damned for a tale," she said, "and a very silly one. I told you years ago that if Harrie wanted me, nothing—no one—should keep me away, didn't I? Very well, you did. Now you're going to pay for meddling in my affairs, for keeping me from my sister. You want to leave here, eh?"

"I am leaving here. Only this morning I have received the offer of Saint Catherine's. I told you that I expected it."

As he watched her, Victor Broom wondered why people called Claudia Bower a beautiful woman. Tall, slim, with an admirable figure—certainly, but her face, he thought, was the hardest he had ever seen. Tight-lipped, with eyes like flints, and a jaw which jutted forward like a man's.

"You're not accepting it," she said. "Sit down, I tell you! It's not going to be pleasant to listen to—this story of mine—but

you're going to hear it. You'll stop here in Stepfield, Victor Broom. It's an immense parish, I'm told, hundreds of poverty-stricken people, who need the Gospel preached to them. I'm also told that you have a knack of preaching to them very well. Then—you'd better stay here—for the good of their souls and your own ! I feel your soul wants to be given a chance—a chance to conform to the rules and regulations which are laid down for the clergy. I was surprised when I heard that you hadn't married again—knowing you. I made inquiries—oh, I know that I've got a debased, abominable, filthy mind, that's why I understand you so well—and found that you hadn't entirely outgrown your liking for females ! Only you went further afield to find them. There's something damned unpleasant in a parson skulking off to Paris in mufti, and having a hell of a row in an hotel bedroom with a French prostitute, isn't there ?"

For a second she thought that he was going to strike her, then he moved away, let his hand drop at his side and stared at her, his mouth a little open, his eyes horror-struck.

"You—you're mistaken. That was—my brother—I remember the incident."

"No, no." Claudia's voice was tolerantly amused. "That bird won't fight. Gerry's positively besotted with Edith. Besides—you're lying and you know it. Throw in the sponge, Victor !"

"I defy you to prove it !"

She stooped and picked up her gloves and bag which lay on a chair.

"Do you ? Very well, accept Saint Catherine's and I'll bombard you with postcards, I'll tell the story all over London—damn it, if it's necessary I'll buy a paper, run it for a week and publish the whole thing. I'll force you to start a libel action, and then you'll see what I can prove ! You see—I don't care if I set half London by the ears. My daughter isn't marrying into society. I don't really care about it, it wouldn't trouble me if I never saw London again. You do." She laughed. "You care—like the devil !"

He licked his full lips. "Don't go for a moment," he said. "We might talk this out—might come to an understanding."

"I think not." She spoke as if all her interest in the matter had evaporated. "I want to get back. Write to Gostred, say you feel that your work lies here—you know the sentimental stuff—it comes easily to you. Let me have a note tonight to say that you've declined Saint Catherine's. That's all I want. If you don't—then in twenty-four hours I'll begin to chatter. You see, I stay at the 'Royale' too, sometimes—with Edward."

He sprang forward and caught her wrist. "Claudia—it's unfair. Why have you always hated me? I always liked you, wanted to—to—"

"To kiss me!" she said. "Let go of my wrist—God, what a loathsome thing you are! I'm doing this because I swore that I'd make you pay for robbing me of seeing my sister for the last time. Now I've made you pay the debt. If you want advancement in the future—work for it! I shan't stop you, but this time you shan't get it. There—I'm going. Write that letter, Victor—and don't forget to post it this time, remember."

"Portland Square," she said to the driver. "Get back quickly. This is a dirty part of London, eh?"

"'Orrible, lidy—some very queer customers about these parts, too!" Claudia, with her foot on the step, looked up at him, smiling. "I believe you! I've just interviewed one of them!"

CHAPTER FOUR

I

"YES, we might have chosen a larger church," Claudia agreed, "but I had a fancy for Saint Catherine's, and the Vicar—nice young man—will go a long way." 'What rubbish I'm talking,' she thought. 'I know nothing about the Vicar and care less; all I know is that Victor Broom is still down in Stepfield !'

She agreed with everyone that Fernanda looked beautiful, that the mother of the bridegroom looked terribly smart, that Henri looked just like an Englishman, and that Wilfred looked exactly like his father. She felt that she had been agreeing with people for hours, listening to vapid burblings which meant nothing, forcing her face into a mechanical smile to greet people whose faces might be vaguely familiar, but whose names had entirely escaped her.

Fernanda, unbelievably tall in her white dress draped with old lace, with Henri, dark and meticulously well groomed, at her side, seemed to be enjoying it all. She laughed, chattered, and apparently remembered exactly who had given her cut crystal, and who had sent fish-servers. Robert, whose bright head showed above every other in the room, kept bending down to speak to his short, dark little wife. Little ! Nothing little about Gwen except her actual inches. She was far too fat, but she seemed to content Robert—nothing else mattered. Their twin boys stood with Wilfred, very white as to collar, black-coated and striped-trousered. Three little boys turned out to a pattern so far as clothes and education went. Wilfred talking and eating at the same time. 'That's the sixth ice I've seen him eat, little pig !' Claudia thought. 'No wonder the lad's growing tubby. Owen is taller than Wilfred. Good-looking boy, if only his eyes weren't so close together. I like Hugh better—probably because he's more like Robert.' She

sighed. 'Not a Marsden left among the lot of them ! Robert's safe—they're all safe !'

Then Edward at her elbow, immense in frock-coat and huge tie with a black pearl pin, mopping his face from time to time, and holding a glass of champagne in his hand. 'He and Wilfred never stop eating and drinking,' Claudia thought. "How many glasses is that, Edward ?"

"Lost count ! Claudia, m'dear"—he was puffing badly today—"an old friend—the man who made the Bower car—David Betterton."

For an instant the world rocked, then with her hand on Edward's arm, because just to touch Edward made her feel anchored and safe, she turned to meet him. Older, much older, all the boyish outline gone, his face thin, almost scraggy. His eyes as blue as ever, though some of the gold had faded from his hair.

"How delightful !" Her voice was artificial and she realized it. "How charming that you should come on the day of Fernanda's wedding ! Have you seen her ? There ! Rather lovely, we think—don't we, Edward ?"

"How do you do, Lady Bower ?" His voice was deeper, he had lost his broad north-country vowels. "Yes. I only came down from the north last night."

"Edward has given Henri—my son-in-law—a car for a wedding present. Of course, a 'Bower', the only car worth driving."

"Until the new model comes out next year. Robert wants it called the Betterton-Bower. That *is* a marvel." He turned to Edward : "Forty, we ought to get out of her."

Again that artificial Claudia Bower was speaking : "Forty miles an hour ! Impossible, surely ? Still, we've come to expect miracles from you."

He looked at her, his eyes unsmiling. "Not miracles—there are limits to what I can accomplish."

Then Henri came and said that Fernanda was going to change, and Claudia, still smiling, rustled away, trailing her lace and silk over the thick carpet, and joined her daughter in the big bedroom where Miss Stocker, Mrs. Haversham, Marie and even Madame Louise were already congregated.

'Nanda married. In another bedroom Henri was stripping off his frock-coat, and getting into a tweed suit. 'Nanda's husband—'Nanda was Mrs. Henri Pinto. This was the room where 'Nanda had been born, here Ferdinand Coster and his wife had hung over the child's cot and speculated as to what name she should bear. Here Ferdinand had told Claudia that they were Jews.

"My dear child, my good Claudia . . ." Claudia stood watching 'Nanda. So tall, so straight and slim, and yet with that little air of determination, of knowing her own mind, that always came as a small shock. 'It's the Jew in her,' Claudia thought. 'How wise I was to give her Jewish blood! Under all her placidity, her dutifulness, there is that something—that is steel. 'Nanda will always be safe enough.'

She watched her turn this way and that, while Miss Stocker fluttered, while Madame Louise praised and flattered, while Mrs. Haversham, her plump hands folded over an ample stomach, blinked back tears and ejaculated: "Think of it! My Miss Fernanda—married—well, well." Claudia thought: 'Here am I, Claudia Bower, this young woman's mother, watching her dressed to go away with her husband, and down-stairs—sipping champagne with my husband—is the man who loved me, who is—my brother. What an impossible situation! If it wasn't tragic, it would be too comic for words.'

"There," Fernanda said, "don't twitch it any more, Stockie, it's quite all right. Do I look nice, Madame Louise? Remember that I've married a Frenchman—a Parisian!"

"Not even Worth himself could find a fault! This dress is my masterpiece!"

"I've heard you say that to mummy a dozen times, madame!"

Claudia lit a cigarette, and blew out a cloud of tobacco-smoke. She was leaning against the end of the bed, and Fernanda, glancing at her, exchanging one quick glance of affection and admiration, was struck again with her mother's beauty. 'Henri says that I'm lovely,' the girl thought, 'but I'm just ordinarily good-looking compared with mummy.'

"When I look at you, sweetest," she said, "I almost wish that I'd stuck to painting and left marriage alone. I might

have netted that five hundred that Edward once promised me for the first picture I had hung in Burlington House."

"Would that have been worth more than Henri?" Claudia asked.

"In my present state of mind," Fernanda said, "emphatically—no."

Claudia wrinkled her nose in simulated disgust. "I hate you modern young women," she said. "You're all so horribly obvious."

"That's because we're all fundamentally such simple souls," Nanda said, slipping her arm into Claudia's. They stood together, practically the same height, with the same bright hair and blue eyes; they both smiled, and Claudia felt the sudden pressure of her daughter's fingers on her arm, which said more than any words could have done. In the pressure was a wealth of affection, a wordless admission that she was a little nervous, but that she did not intend to allow anyone but Claudia to know it.

"Mrs. Haversham, you'll make your nose red, and everyone will think you've been up here drinking on the sly. Stockie—smile, for goodness' sake. I shall be back in a month—that's all the time my slave-driving mother will allow my wretched husband. No, Louise—not one more pin! Come, mummy, let's get down."

They walked down the stairs together, Fernanda's arm still through her mother's, their heads bent together.

"Quite happy, my darling?"

"Absolutely—not a bit afraid. He is such a dear."

"Don't racket about Paris too much, get down to the villa as soon as possible."

Suddenly Fernanda stopped and faced her mother. Speaking very softly, she said: "It's all right, no one can hear. I know all that you feel you ought to have said, I know all the panics you're going through. Will you get into your beautiful head that—it's all right? I couldn't have borne you to 'talk seriously' to me. I'm not a fool, mummy—and living in the country does prevent you growing up ignorant, y'know."

Claudia put her hand under the girl's round, determined chin and, leaning forward, kissed her.

Edward bellowed from the foot of the wide stairs : "Come on, both of you. Henri's on the point of driving off alone, says he won't wait."

"Beautiful and touching picture," Robert told them as they reached the hall. "I've never seen anything better done!"

Claudia said : "Shut up, Robbie, and don't be so devastatingly amusing." Wilfred clutched her hand in an ecstasy of excitement. "Mummy, I tied the slipper on to the back axle, it shows like anything. Will Henri be waxy, d'you think?"

The Bower "Coronation" model moved off. Henri—goggles and dreadful peaked cap complete—waved and nearly ran into the kerb, then the car gathered speed and disappeared round the corner of the square.

Walking back into the house, after the cameras had stopped clicking, Claudia, her arm through Edward's, said to David : "You must come and dine one evening—could you manage Friday? Edward, where are we going on Friday?"

"St. James's—Eva Moore in *The Wilderness*."

"Come on with us after dinner, Mr. Betterton. I hear that it's a charming play."

"That's very kind of you."

"Not at all. We must kill the fatted calf for the Prodigal Son—though perhaps you're scarcely that. The 'Return of the Wanderer' might be better."

As he walked away, David, his hands clasped behind him, his stick trailing in his wake, thought : 'What's happened to her? She's successful—and, my God, how artificial! But as lovely as ever. I almost wish that I hadn't come back after all.'

II

Edward had gone to speak to his secretary, and she was left alone with David. Had the evening been a success, Claudia wondered? Edward, David, Gwendoline and herself in a box at the nicest theatre in London. She had sat with her arms folded on the edge of the box, had stared at the stage; subconsciously she had listened, heard and realized all that was going on there; the conscious side of her mind had been terribly

active, asking questions, trying to analyse her reactions to David's proximity. Here was the man she had loved intensely, perhaps the only man she had ever loved passionately in all her life; he had come back after an absence of many years, still lacking any knowledge of the truth. Once she turned her head, and caught sight of the firm line of his jaw, noticed how the hair on his temples was shot with grey, and once again had registered her determination that he should never know the truth, never possess the knowledge that the woman he loved was his sister. That was simple and direct; it was when she began to examine her own feelings that she found matters more complex. The first sight of him at Fernanda's wedding had stirred her profoundly, so deeply that she had taken refuge in a determined artificiality, as if it were something concrete behind which Claudia Bower might hide. Afterwards, she had asked him to come to dinner, and once again she felt that wave of apprehension sweep over her—fear of herself, distrust of her own ability to conceal all she felt, even a certain trepidation that she might betray herself in some way.

Dinner had been sufficiently easy. Gwen chattered, as she always did, chiefly concerning Robert and the boys, and it had been simple enough to encourage her, to keep the conversation along family lines. David had listened, interjected a word or two, been sympathetic when necessary, and had barely spoken to Claudia. At the theatre, she had said: "Sit there, Gwen dear. Will you be able to see there, Edward?—because if you can't see you'll go to sleep and disturb everyone—oh yes, you will, my dear. Now, Mr. Betterton, is that all right for you? Good!"

Then the play had begun, and her mind had twisted and turned, trying to find a solution to her problems. "Out of the wilderness—into the light," someone said on the stage. Claudia felt that she was in a wilderness, where brambles caught and held her. Could you stop loving anyone simply because you had no right to love them? If love could be checked and changed and diverted—was it love?

'All these years,' she thought, 'I've shut the door of my mind against him, kept him out, guarded myself against thoughts of him. I might have been wiser to have flung the door open

wide ! Now, the fact that whenever I look at him I force myself to say : "David—my brother," doesn't check that sense of excitement, that sudden beating of my heart, because I have never forgotten that he is "David—my lover", the one lover I have ever wanted.'

Later, Edward had left them together and departed, panting and wheezing, into his study to sign papers or letters. David stood watching her, his face very grave ; when she smiled there was no answering light in his eyes.

"So you married Edward—" he said slowly.

"Obviously !" She tried to make her voice light, a little flippant.

"If you could only have waited," he continued, "you would have realized that I have made money—a great deal of money."

Claudia laid down her feather fan on the table, and took a step towards him. "Listen, David !" she ordered. "That's not fair ! You have no right to wait until Edward leaves you alone with me, and then immediately begin to talk in that way. To begin with it's a lie, and secondly, it's damned unfair to Edward."

"There was so much damned unfairness about the whole business, that surely a little more makes no difference," he said heavily.

"If you're going to stay in London, you've got to put that behind you. I was young—I didn't know my own mind—there were a dozen reasons—"

"Of which you did not give me one that held water !"

She tried to control herself, tried to find some statement which should satisfy, take the look of heavy misery from his face. She had blackened herself in his eyes before, and now, apparently, she must continue to do so. What did it matter ? 'I mustn't care,' she thought wildly. 'I mustn't allow myself to care whether I hurt him or myself. What does it matter ? David, my brother !'

"Now—I'm nearly forty, my daughter was married a few days ago, I've a son at school, I'm married—what's the use of raking all this up again, David ? Can't we let it rest, and just be good friends ? It's all so—useless."

His lips twisted into a smile, "It's my logical, mechanical mind, I suppose—I like reasons, causes, effects. Forgive me."

She held out her hand, he took it, and stood staring at her.

"Take my advice," she said: "look forward, not backward. Get married, David, there are so many nice women in the world—and you're a very pleasant fellow!"

"My dear, I'd get married tomorrow," he said, "if I didn't know that I should compare every woman with Claudia Coster—to their disadvantage."

Because she was a woman, because she still loved him, she almost said: "What, still—with a grown-up daughter—when I'm nearly forty?" then checked herself, and contrived to say lightly: "That's utter nonsense. Have another drink before the ice all melts, won't you?"

For the remainder of the season, she knew that she consciously avoided him, and when they met she watched every word, weighing it before she spoke, never saying anything which might have given him an opportunity to refer to what was past. It was difficult, for there were times when she longed to talk to him frankly and freely, when she felt that she could have confided in him as an elder brother, have asked his advice with regard to Edward's health, have spoken of old Ferdinand Coster, of Fernanda and all her hopes for her. Instead, after that one evening, Claudia assumed once again her air of flippant artificiality, and whenever David met her he found her beautifully gowned, talking rapidly, interested in what seemed to him to be trivialities, and with every hour of the day mapped out and arranged for.

In July they went back to Marlingly, and Henri Pinto and Fernanda went to live at Portland Square.

III

It was good to be back, good to know that there would be no necessity for her to leave Yorkshire until she took Wilfred to London for Christmas pantomimes and those gaieties after which his small soul hankered. In Yorkshire, even the problem of David seemed to recede somewhat, there was so much to do, so many interests. "In Town," she told Edward, "things

crowd in on you, they oppress you. Once you begin to allow them to catch hold they want every hour of the day. Here, things need your attention but there are twelve good, solid hours in every twenty-four in which to do them—and they're worth doing. I'm really starting my work now. I want to do something for the land—there's young Bill Thorpe, with a game leg thanks to the war ; he knows more about land than his old father ever imagined there was to know. I've bought Clay's End, Edward."

He grunted. "Not a very good proposition for a start, is it ? Clay's End is the right name for it—it's the clarest bit of land for miles."

"The house is good, the buildings aren't too bad, the land's never had a chance. I'll make it so that you won't know that it's the same place."

"Going to turn landowner—make yourself a sporting, shooting, hunting woman, eh ?"

"Bit of rough shooting for the boys," she said, "but—no one hunts on my land, if I know it."

"You'll make yourself damned unpopular." Edward grinned.

"That matters a devil of a lot to me !"

"They'll say it's because your own husband's too fat to ride !"

"Let 'em say what they like."

Bill Thorpe, standing in the saloon bar of the "King's Head" one evening, admitted that his new job was not always easy.

"Her ladyship can give you a touch of her quality when she's a mind," he said. "Mind, nothing's stinted, there's plenty of everything, we're fitted with all Bower's latest models—tip-top shape everything's in. No traps, that's the order. 'What you can't shoot clean can run !' No ferrets. Never mind what's always been done—it's not done here. Hens, geese, chickens—shut them up so that the fox can't get at 'em.' That's her orders."

"What's she doing wi' Clay's End ?" old Watson asked, his long, thin nose tipped superciliously.

"Naay, lad, it's not ondly Clay's End, it's three fields of what was 'Utchinson's an' all !" Blenkinsom objected. "That's

what money does ! Maakes it easy fur m'laady ter collar what she wants."

"Come, come," Thorpe objected. "She's paid a fair price for what she's gotten, choose how."

Little Willie Clayton looked up from his corner. Clayton was a wisp of a fellow, who had been brought down to a shadow by enteric and dysentery.

"Ah can tell ye what she's a-doin' wi' it," he said. "She's startin' me theer, onct Ah've cum back fra' a gert plaace near Manchester wheer they breed 'ens. She's using them fields that was 'Utchinsson's ter start a poultry farm. Me and 'Arry Kendrick an' Garge Moore's runnin' it. We all on uz got pretty well knocked ter 'ell i' t' damned war. That's what's to be done wi' it. Now if any of ye 'as aught ter saay aboot Edward Bower's missus, come on an' saay it."

Bill Thorpe's ears were a brilliant scarlet. "Nay, Will laad, I said nout. I'm glad enough of the job. Things aren't what they weer when my father was Thorpe of Brigend, only it does seem a bit funny not to allow hounds to run over the land, not to have ferrets, and to give orders that whoever is found with a whippet or greyhound—and using 'em for a bit of coursing—gets the sack."

"It's 'er land," Clayton persisted. "You run your 'ouse as you like, she does t' saame wi' 'er land. Fair's fair."

Robert, dining at Marlingly, pursed his lips, and said : "I should take care, Claudie, or you'll end by making yourself unpopular with the county. They won't like this attitude of yours about hunting."

"Let them lump it, then ! Wilfred, no more nuts, my boy. You'll be up all night screaming with stomach-ache."

"Makes it difficult for me. I enjoy a day's hunting, y'know."

She stared at him. "Do you, Robbie—do you really ? Why ?"

"Why ? The exercise, the sport, the excitement."

"Wouldn't you get all those with a good drag ?"

Robert's face expressed disgust. "My dear girl—whatever next ?"

"Lots of things," she laughed at his blank expression, "only I won't pain you by recounting them."

In the drawing-room, where the long windows were open on to the terrace which led down to the lawns that Claudia loved so dearly, she sat with the three boys, while Robert remained smoking and sipping port with Edward. She had a great affection for these boys—her own son and Robert's. Wilfred might be a little slow, heavy, and far too greedy. Owen—dark, with a skin which lacked any of Wilfred's bright colour, whose eyes were just a little too close together—had an intelligence which was almost needle-like ; Hugh, the younger of the two by thirty-four minutes, fair, pale-faced, with wide grey eyes and lashes that would have been more suitable for a girl, who was so shy with everyone except Claudia, was possibly the nearest if not the dearest to her.

"Why won't you have hunting round Marlingly, Aunt Claudia ?" Owen asked.

"She won't have it," Wilfred said, "because it's cruel. It's a blood sport."

Claudia said : "There, now you know all about it !"

"Sorry, mummy, but that was right, wasn't it ? I hate shooting, too."

Owen said : "That's because you hate walking a lot, isn't it ?"

"No, it never is ! Mummy, tell him I do walk."

"Of course you do, my angel"—she laughed—"when you can't ride."

Hugh, speaking for the first time, said : "It's knowing that things were frightened that would frighten me. If you shoot anything—well, it's all over before it knows what's going to happen." He shivered. "It's beastly to be frightened."

Owen shrugged his shoulders : "I never am !"

Claudia said, disregarding Owen, as she always contrived to do when he boasted, "What things frighten you, my bairn ?"

"Frighten me ?" Hugh asked. "Well, not so many things now as used to. I used to be awfully frightened of the system in the attic at Seston—"

"He means cistern," Wilfred explained. "It's cistern, Hugh."

Hugh nodded, "Yes, cistern ; and the coats that hang in the little lobby through the hall, and those big chests on the

first landing—those used to make me just sweat all over with fear. They don't now, of course."

"Why don't they?"

He sat on a footstool, hugging his knees, and thought for a moment, then said: "Well, I sort of—exposed them! I used to go up to the attic and get Wilf to go with me—didn't I, Wilf?—and we used to climb on chairs and lift the cover and look in. I used to say—not aloud, of course—'Nothing there, just a lot of water ready to pour into my bath when I make it!' I used to go upstairs and open the lids of the chests very quickly, and say to myself: 'Now we'll catch whatever's hiding inside, and *bang* it!' Of course, there never was anything inside. The same with the coats—I'd go and catch hold of them and waggle them about and say: 'Come out, whoever is trying to hide behind these coats, and I'll *smash* you!' Then, gradually, I knew that I wasn't frightened any more."

Owen laughed his queer laugh, which even in a boy sounded sarcastic.

"If there had been anyone there, you'd never have banged them or smashed them, young Hugh."

"I know," his brother admitted, "only"—with a chuckle—"they didn't know that, did they, just supposing anyone had been there."

"I think it was a jolly good idea," Wilfred said. "I used to be frightened of the noise of the water running out of the bath—gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, and the swish, swish in the lavatory! Now, I'm only frightened that a football may bang me in the stomach and wind me!"

"Then kick it when you see it coming and it can't bang you in the stomach," Owen advised.

Robert entered with Edward, and came over to the little group.

"Isn't it time all you chaps were off to bed? Your aunt won't have you staying here again if you hang around boring her to tears like this. Off with you, Owen—come on, Hugh, say 'Good night'."

As she lay in bed, staring at the sky where stars twinkled and glimmered, Claudia remembered what Hugh had said.

" . . . lift the cover . . . open the lids . . . catch hold of the coats and waggle them. . . ."

'He's right,' she said softly, 'that's what I've got to do. Not rush about feverishly trying to forget the cistern and chests and coats, not averting my eyes, but go up to them—these things that frighten me—and face them boldly. Not make myself an artificial person whenever I meet David, not shiver and get apprehensive each time I am afraid that I've given myself away. Face them, my girl, say firmly that it's over. Not a soul in the world knows except yourself. Father Ferdinand and my mother were the only other people ! Even this love I have for him, I'm even afraid to face that. I've pushed it away in a corner, and tried to pretend that it wasn't there. I'll pull it out into the sunlight, and look at it. Plants grown in the dark always shoot up to a tremendous height, but they aren't able to stand long in the broad daylight, they wither and turn yellow. Up shall go the lids, off shall come the covers, "Come out, you ghosts. Let me look at you in the light of day without fear !"'

CHAPTER FIVE

I

ROBERT, coming up from the tennis-court, joined his sister under the big tree. Claudia had set her face resolutely against having tennis-courts on the lawns. "If you want them," she said, "then make them where I can neither see nor hear them."

Wilfred had grinned. "You can't hear a tennis-court, mummy."

"I can see them and hear you—that's too much, believe me," she returned, and so the courts were screened from the lawns by a great hedge of thick-growing privet, and Claudia kept her lawns.

"Drink, Robbie?"

He threw himself down on the grass near her, for Robert Fluellyn at thirty-nine still retained his good figure and ease of movement.

"Win?" Claudia asked as she handed him the long tumbler in which the ice clinked pleasantly.

Robert, his face buried in the glass, tried to nod and sputtered. "Yes, though Wilfred's hot stuff. Owen's not bad for a youngster, but Hugh—well, I'm worried about Hugh. He does nothing well—that he ought to do."

She laughed. "You're always so certain as to what people ought and ought not to do, aren't you?"

"Yes, thanks to your training, Claudie."

"Mine? Oh, I'm growing more tolerant as I grow older. At forty-one I've grown remarkably tractable, astonishingly pliable. I don't think either of us looks our ages, d'you?"

"You certainly don't," he returned quickly, and then, smoothing his thick fair hair, he added: "Candidly, I don't think that I look mine."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, her voice was mocking,

but the expression on her face was very tender. "No, still the super-elegant Robert. How poor Gwen always admired you, didn't she?—and made no bones about it either. Y'know, I miss Gwen, often. She was always so sensible, so kindly—one could rely on her."

"I miss her, too," Robert said. "More than either of the boys do, I fancy. Queer, she never seemed to understand them—or they her. Pity."

"Owen isn't easy to understand, Bobbie," Claudia said. "He's queer, and self-contained—he's sufficient unto himself. Hugh—he's a different proposition."

"I find it exactly t' other way round. I can manage Owen, but I'm hanged if I can understand Hugh. Funny fellow—moony, that's what he is—moony."

Slowly the others began to straggle back from the courts. Wilfred, tall, plain and heavy, his face redeemed only by his wide smile and white, even teeth; Owen, slim, handsome, with a dark good looks that made him so different from the rest of the family; and Hugh, fair-haired, blue-eyed, his mouth too soft and beautifully shaped for a boy, his hands too long and slender—his whole body always looked to Claudia as if it were going to spring into the air. "Poised for flight"—that was how Hugh always looked. Behind them Fernanda, with her two over-dressed children, Jane and Bobbie, precocious and clever, spoilt and petted, and in their wake Henri bearing rugs and cushions, toys and soft bouncing balls.

Claudia called to him, "Henri, put those down—Barker can bring them." Then with sudden irritation to Fernanda, "'Nanda, don't let Henri make himself a beast of burden. Wilf, Owen—go and help Henri!"

Fernanda, with a rustling of silk, exuding a faint smell of some expensive French perfume, sank down in the chair which Hugh pulled forward for her. "Henri likes to do it, darling. It registers his position as my husband and the brats' father. Bobbie, sit still for five seconds. Jane, stop kissing Hugh, you'll make him as hot as yourself. Henri, come and sit down here, by me, and protect me from my irate mother."

Wilfred laughed. "Protect you! I don't think! You're quite able to look after yourself, 'Nanda."

"I hope so," she said calmly. "It's very necessary in these days."

Hugh lay on his back, gently repulsing the shameless advances of Jane Pinto, who, displaying a large amount of frilled drawers, was attempting to press kisses on his face. He looked at her between his half-closed lids. How pretty she was; even at four years old it was evident that Jane would be a beauty. All the women of the family were lovely, Hugh thought. Claudia at—what was she?—forty-one, still made other women look colourless. 'Nanda was lovely, too, but she was less vital, colder, more self-contained, self-sufficient, self-confident. There was quite a lot of "self" about 'Nanda.

Snatches of conversation reached him; it amused Hugh to listen and not be obliged to participate. Robert's rather drawling voice was not unlike this very summer's afternoon—languid, taking its time, pleasant.

"... they're doing far too much, that's the root of the matter. Because fifty-three of them have got into the House, it's made everyone pander to them. The Compensation Act—impossible, far too many loop-holes for the men and none for the masters. Then this permission for 'peaceful picketing'. There never has been such a thing and never will—"

"Rubbish, Robert! Don't talk like a damned fool! We've had it all our own way too long—masters, employers. It's inevitable, the swing of the pendulum. Nothing to what you're going to see if you wait a little."

That was Claudia! Her voice moved at twice the pace of Robert's. 'Her mind moves faster than father's, too,' Hugh thought; 'it's quicker. If women do get a vote, I'd like to see Claudia in Parliament!'

"In France," Henri's careful, rather exact voice said, "in France there are many changes, I find. There is a rising sense of responsibility towards the workers, a feeling that the producers ought to share in the wealth which they make. England has, of course, always been first in the things which affect social matters, is that not so?"

"She likes to think she has," Wilf said. Funny how Wilf suddenly came out with queer things like that!

"Oh, please do not throw any aspersions at England!"

Henri cried. "To me she is the best, most just, most charitable country in the world!"

'Nanda said: "My darling Henri, being a naturalized Englishman, is more patriotic than any of us! It's always the way—like converts to the Roman Catholic Church—"

"Well, and why not?" Claudia asked. "After all, Henri chose his country, we had ours given to us at birth."

"Henri didn't particularly choose England," 'Nanda answered. "Henri chose me, and took England in his stride, as it were."

Then the noise of a car reached Hugh, and he sat up and looked towards the gates, because the sight of the car moving so smoothly, with the blue-liveried driver, and Uncle Edward and David Betterton seated at the back with the hood down, always pleased him. It fascinated him that by turning levers, by holding a wheel, people could be drawn along so swiftly and easily. Swiftly—why, this Spring the new Bower model did nearly sixty miles an hour, and David said that was nothing at all.

'Nanda said: "Jane—Bobbie—run—go to meet grandpapa! There he is!" Funny, they always called Edward "grandpapa", but never called Claudia anything but "Claudia"—or at least what kids thought was that name.

"Hugh, darling, hold Jane's hand, she'll tumble!"

Claudia watched the boy run after Jane, catch her hand and help her forward. Bobbie never slipped and tumbled as Jane did, he was perfectly certain on his feet. Pretty children, nice children—spoilt, of course, but then Henri and 'Nanda between them would ruin any children. They over-indulged Wilf and Owen and Hugh, whenever they went to stay at Portland Square, taking them to dinner at expensive restaurants, taking them to race-meetings and boxing-matches—allowing them to behave like men about Town! Preposterous! Henri was a good fellow, all the same. She must remember to tell him to stick to the 1906, and leave the '07 alone. Old Pinto said that 1908 would be a poor year, too. Funny how the years differed. Still, Coster's had immense stocks, they could afford to pick and choose, to live up to their reputation of selling nothing but the best. Edward stood by her chair, and to prevent his

stooping she got up and kissed him. His face was quite damp with the heat.

Homburg, Baden-Baden, Marienbad—none of them did Edward any good. He put on more weight every year, and his cures took off less each time he visited the wretched places. Fernanda said sharply to Owen : "Get up—you're in Edward's chair." Owen jumped up and said : "Oh, sorry, sir, awfully sorry"—and Edward lowered himself carefully down on to the broad seat.

He stared round at them all, nodding and smiling. "Well—friends, Romans, countrymen—the Wizard of the North, David Betterton, has done it!"

David, tall, thin, and looking beautifully cool in spite of the heat, laughed. "No, no, Edward. Don't overdo it. I've managed—something. A machine, heavier than air, that will, at least, rise off the ground. Remember, we're all working on the same idea, I'm not alone. The question is how long will it stay in the air, how fast will it move, what weight will it carry?"

"In fact," Robert said, "quite a series of questions, eh?"

David nodded, then glanced at Claudia, his eyebrows a little lifted as if he asked if Robert wasn't really rather apt to damp one's fondest hopes. There was something so intimate, and yet so friendly, in his glance, that she laughed with pleasure, and said : "Hit him, Davy—he forgets he's really only a child—not yet forty—while you and I are past that age."

No, no," David said tolerantly, "let the wretched little creature live to see my success—who cares for Robert, anyway?"

They were all talking. David telling them about his new machine, Edward tearing pieces of paper into narrow strips with his red, swollen fingers, to make a rough model, the boys crowding round, even 'Nanda leaning forward, Henri's hand in hers, to watch more closely.

'I've won,' Claudia thought. 'At last David and I have learnt to accept each other without reservations, without fears and reproaches. I don't know when I first realized it—some time during the last year, I suppose. I pulled everything out into the light, and that monstrous growth, that horrible thing that had been bred in the darkness, that had become so tall,

and apparently strong, yet tinged with disease, just began, in the sunshine, to shrink and die. I remember how difficult it was at first to disregard it, to treat David as if there was nothing—to remember. The small ways I tried at first, and his almost pained surprise that I should treat him exactly as I treated Robert, and not as if he were a patient recovering slowly and painfully from a long illness.' That night, after dinner: "David, Robert's not going up to Town tomorrow, are you? Then telephone to Fernanda and ask her to send that parcel of books down to you for me, will you? And if you've time could you go over to Ryder's and ask about that delphinium—what's it called?—Russian Midnight. I want it down as quickly as possible—eight dozen."

He had stared, almost hurt that she could have given him orders for such ordinary things. It had been difficult enough, too, at first. Only very slowly had she come to be able to introduce that "ordinary" note into everything. She remembered the day when she had handed him a long list of things which she wanted done—messages for 'Nanda, messages for Henri, orders to Mrs. Haversham, and twenty other instructions. He held it in his hand for a moment, then frowned and said, almost as Robert might have done: "I say, Claudia, I can't manage all this lot! I'm not going to Town just for fun, y'know. Cut them down by half and I'll see what can be done." It had been so un-loverlike, so brotherly, that she could have laughed aloud. Then one evening on the terrace, when she walked with her arm through Robert's, and David joined them, walking on her other side. She had hesitated, wondered if she dared, and finally—with a greater effort than anyone would ever know—had slipped her arm through David's, so that the three of them paced along together. She had felt his arm stiffen, knew that the muscles swelled suddenly because he was clenching his hand. She let her hand remain on his arm, kept her voice even, talked of everyday matters, and slowly his arm relaxed. Now—their relationship was established. He accepted her as Edward's wife, as Robert's sister, and as his own particular friend. He talked to her of his work, his plans, hopes and fears. She had been the first to hear of his every new invention, he had confided his worries

over each experiment, and had come to her to announce each new success.

Robert settled—for though he regretted Gwen, Robert was happy enough—David established, successful and content in her friendship, and Edward blandly, wheezily satisfied with life. Dear Edward, as she had once told him, just a great, greedy child—while at the works, in business, she knew him to be astute and able to hold his own anywhere. He was nodding now, sleepy after his drive home, his tea and that pastry which he had eaten when she was not watching him. She rose and laid her hand on his shoulder.

“Edward, go and have your rest before dinner, you’re tired.”

He yawned. “A-a-ah! Yes—I’ll have a rest. Hugh, pull me up out of this confounded chair. That’s better.”

Robert, David and Edward. She’d done her work for them sufficiently successfully. Her eyes turned to Henri and Fernanda, their heads almost touching, talking intimately in whispers. Once he lifted his hand and laid it against ’Nanda’s cheek for a second; she smiled back at him. ’Nanda might pretend to be very modern, but she was still in love with Henri Pinto, and his devotion to her was obvious. Yes, they were right enough, those two.

There remained Wilfred—her son. Strong, healthy, and never giving her—or Edward—any anxiety. “The only fellow I’ve ever met,” Edward said, “who found his allowance sufficient for his needs at the ’Varsity. Astonishing feller, Wilf.”

But still vague as to his future. “I might go into the works, mummy,” he said, “only I don’t know anything about machinery, and care less. There wouldn’t be room for me in Coster’s—with Henri. Anyway, wine doesn’t interest me a scrap. I’d rather like to have a plunge at this chicken-farming business of yours. That interests me enormously.”

“Pooh! Chicken-farming’s all right for those poor devils of disabled men—Clayton and Moore. It’s all right for Bill Thorpe to look after the land—but remember he does it under my direction, though he doesn’t realize it! It’s no life for you, Wilf.”

He rubbed his short, dun-coloured hair with his hand.
"Well, I dunno. Seems a pretty good life to me."

"No real money in it," she objected.

"I thought you said that your land paid!" he said, shooting a glance at her from his light eyes.

"It pays—but it's not big money. It's not on a par with Bower's or Coster's."

"Do we need any more money? Haven't we got enough?"

"Really, Wilf! Have sense, my dear. It's not the actual money that I want for you—your father and I have sufficient. It's only that making money—as things are in the world—denotes achievement, success. Lack of money usually argues lack of success. You see that, don't you? You see that I want you to—make a success."

Queer, vague fellow, that son of hers. Still—she squared her shoulders—she'd make a success of him in the end, be proud of him, know that other people were envious of him and the place he had attained in the world.

She leant back and sighed. Life had been hard; even now she worked far harder than most women. Coster's—Henri might be good, but she knew how much difference her weekly visits to London made—her land, chickens, dairy—splendid advertisement for Edward's machines, that model dairy of hers; and now horses. Fine strain, lovely shining animals, with perfect bodies and hearts full of courage. Success, success, success! Old Blenkiron's curse might have come true, but it had done no harm; like a squib, it had risen like a comet and for a time its light had coloured the whole of her sky—but it had come down like a stick! No Marsdens—but plenty of Flueellyns, Bowers and Pintos!

II

She liked dinner to be something of a ceremony. The finest food, the best wine, the table decorated, the silver shining, the loveliest flowers from the garden. Stockie said that all dinners at Marlingly were banquets. "And yet," she told Fernanda, "your dear mother eats so little. Never touches the rich food, only the most simple things."

"I know," Fernanda said. "What she really likes is cold beef, and home-made pickles, then her beloved Wensleydale cheese, and black coffee to round off the meal. All that elaborate food is for father, who ought not to touch it. That's where mummy's so illogical."

Tonight was to be something of an occasion, to celebrate David's success with the "heavier-than-air" machine. Edward had made a sketch of the machine, and the cook had reproduced it in ice and cream and sticks of angelica for the centrepiece, the hot-houses had been robbed of their best fruit and flowers, Claudia had ordered "tails, not those objectionable, sloppy jackets that you're all so fond of, please!"

She wandered in before the last gong went, to look at the table, and stood with Stockie at her side, surveying the effect. The long, rather low room pleased her, the old panelling had been stripped of its hideous grained paint-work and shone out, dim and mellow. Claudia's portrait by Sargent hung over the old Adam's mantelpiece, with its clusters of fruit, flowers and groups of chubby cherubs. "That lovely picture!" Stockie always said when she looked at it. Claudia thought it wooden, Fernanda piously turned her eyes from it whenever she entered the room, and Edward said that it was "the finest thing Sargent ever did".

"Lovely—oh, how lovely it all looks!" Stockie said, her hands clasped in ecstasy.

Claudia laughed: "It's an event, my dear! You've made yourself look very handsome, haven't you? So glad you're good-looking, I couldn't have borne an ugly secretary! Secretary!" She put her arm round Marion Stocker's shoulders. "You're more than that—far more. You're here for life, I'm afraid—no chance of escape from us!"

"I couldn't bear to leave you—any of you," Stockie said fervently.

"Yet in lots of ways you don't approve of me!" Claudia mused. "You hate my tempers, you don't think it's very nice of me to swear and smoke, or do a dozen things that I do. Here's Edward. . . . Isn't the table a dream, isn't Stockie clever to have arranged it, and how magnificent you look! Like a very good-looking edition of Sir John Falstaff in a dress suit!"

"The Fat Knight—thanks for nothing. I'd have you remember I'm a step higher than Sir John in the social scale. I say—is there a glass of sherry going? I can't stand those cocktails of yours, Claudio."

"Do as I do, then—don't drink 'em," she retorted.

"Must drink something," Edward grumbled. "Come on, Stockie, just the three of us. Here we are—Coster's best! What is it, Claudio?"

"That? Palma Fina—see how you like it."

Stockie said: "No, excuse me, Sir Edward, I want to go and see if the cocktails have been taken in. I know Mr. Fluellyn likes his very cold. . . ."

Edward sipped his sherry. "That's—well, that's sherry. My compliments. Great day, this, m'dear. Going to make history, these machines. May see Wilf, or Hugh or Owen flying one some day." He looked at the portrait which he admired so much. "Never look at that without a sense of pleasure. It's you—just you! The most beautiful and the best woman in England."

She smiled. "Doesn't that remark savour just a little of exaggeration?"

"Not a bit." He threw back his head and drained the last drop of sherry.

"That was good. Give me a kiss, Claudio. . . ." Then, "Love me a little bit?"

"More than a little bit."

"Doesn't that remark savour of exaggeration?" His eyes twinkled.

"Not a bit. Come and make the others stop drinking cocktails."

Edward enjoyed his dinner, Claudio thought, as she watched him down the length of the table. He did eat too much, but—poor darling—it was his one indulgence—his food, his wine and his cigars. The Coronation Cuvée was standing the assaults of time pretty well. She lifted her glass, and raised her eyebrows inquisitorily at Henri. He sipped, nodded, then smiled. Nice smile Henri had!

Hugh was saying: ". . . she says that she said, 'You're doing your duty, and I'm doing mine,' and then he started knocking her about. It's horrible."

"Then let 'em stay at home," Owen suggested. "They won't get hurt there."

"And what," Stockie asked, suddenly acid—"what if they are not the happy possessors of a home—what then?"

Owen stared at her. Of all the younger generation he was the only one who ever stared at Stockie as if to remind her that she was merely Claudia's secretary. "Lady Constance Lytton has a home, hasn't she?"

His look annoyed Claudia, she knew that her temper rose, she leant forward and spoke directly to the boy. "That be damned," she said. "It's not only homes these women want, they want justice! And they're going to get it."

Robert coughed nervously. "Come, come, Claudia, you don't defend them, do you?"

"I should if they needed any defence," she said. "They don't, though."

"The King's against it!"

"So was his mother," she flashed back. "He can't stop the tide coming in any more than Canute could years ago. You're against the working-man, Robbie, you're against the women—what the devil are you *for*?"

"Law, order, decent behaviour, Claudio."

"My God! Sorry, Stockie, I didn't mean to say that. Robbie, what's this talk of law? They've told you that the law doesn't recognize them, the law denies them the rights of citizenship—why should they respect the law?"

Wilfred interjected: "They're rebels, they say so."

"Then," Robert said, "rebels must not squeal when they're treated as rebels ought to be."

Suddenly David spoke. "They'll get it," he said, "but they will get it without fighting. Their logical position will appeal to the Government, when they back it with logical behaviour."

Claudia was beyond control now, her eyes shining—brilliantly blue—her cheeks flushed, her lips parted. "David! You pompous ass!" she exclaimed. Then stopped suddenly, and looked from Robert to David. "This isn't new," she said. "We had all this out years ago—when we were young—in mama's dining-room at Tunbridge Wells. Do you remember—Robert—Davy?"

David nodded. "I remember—quite plainly. D'yous, Robert?"

The thought came to her that they were all three able to recall the time without regret, without pain, it had become something—quite ordinary. David was seeking for another rather heavy remark, Robert was frowning with annoyance because he loathed the Suffragists, and she—only remembered it as an argument which had cropped up again after all these years. She laughed, lifted her glass and said lightly: "Well—here's a toast—exit the old and enter the new regime!"

Hugh cried: "That's right, Claudia—Votes for Women, hail the aeroplane, here's to high-powered cars, and the Workman's Compensation Bill!"

Everyone laughed, the little feeling of strain was eased, and Edward's deep voice wheezed, from the head of the table: "Say what y'like, Claudio's right. Progress—advancing civilization—greater output—and that means higher wages and—larger profits. It's only—" he fumbled for a word, then continued—"it's only because 'f these ma-marrers . . ." Claudio thought, 'Good lord, why has he drunk so much? My dear, how very naughty before all these children!'

"It's only 'cause o' th'ze—"

Suddenly Fernanda screamed, "Henri, catch him!"

Edward, his face purple, had slipped sideways, the noise of his breathing filled the room. Robert was on his feet, David pushed back his chair so that it fell clattering to the floor, and Claudio, pushing them all out of her way, reached Edward and began to fumble with his collar.

"Robert—the doctor. David, Wilf, help me to get him down out of this chair. 'Nanda, get the room clear of people. Stockie—tell Hawkins and Benson and Frank to come here. Of course we can get him up between us."

An hour later Edward Bower lay in his own room, his face twisted, his eyes staring and unseeing, his breathing laboured and stertorous.

"A stroke," the smart little doctor from Marbury said. "If you would like me to telegraph for Sir Charles, Lady Bower, I'll do so."

"Sir Charles, nurses, anyone who can do him the slightest

good," she ordered. "How dangerous is it? I want the truth—not something to comfort me."

"It's—very grave, I'm afraid."

"Is he going to die?"

The little man hesitated. "I can't answer that question, Lady Bower. I can only repeat that Sir Edward is gravely ill."

Her tone became less urgent, as if she realized that whatever was done would not save Edward. "Very well, send for Sir Charles—we could send the car to fetch him, if you think it advisable. And nurses—make them send out Sister Harris from Marbury, he knows her and likes her, she always amuses him when he goes to the hospital."

He didn't dare to tell her that neither Sister Harris nor anyone else was likely to amuse Edward Bower, he only nodded and agreed to all that she said, then, giving his directions, he went out to telephone for the great doctor. She was left alone with Stockie, in the room filled with Edward's terrible, noisy breathing.

CHAPTER SIX

I

ALL day long, seated under the big tree on the lawn, she had watched the stream of workmen, in their stiff Sunday clothes, come up the drive and disappear into the house, so that they might say "good-bye" to Edward. When they caught sight of her, the men lifted their hats, but most of them kept their eyes turned away from the lawn as if, knowing that she sat there, they had no wish to intrude upon her grief.

She had felt that it was hopeless from the first, something had told her that Edward was dying. For three days he had lain there, knowing no one, never moving, his eyes staring at the ceiling ; then, during the night of the third day, one of the nurses had come and tapped on her bedroom door. She was awake, standing by the window.

"Yes ? How is he ?"

"Sister Harris thought that I had better come for you, Lady Bower. There's a change——"

Even though she had expected it, a sudden sense of panic swept over her. Edward dying—Edward going to leave her—Edward who was so dependent upon her—Edward who looked to her for everything. He couldn't possibly go away and leave her, they'd been together so long, they were part of each other's lives.

He hadn't moved, only his breathing seemed less laboured. Wilf, still dressed, stood at the end of the bed, and whispered : "I believe that he seems a bit better."

"Is he ?" Claudia asked the little Scottish nurse who had always made Edward laugh when he went to the hospital for Board Meetings.

"I'd not say that, Lady Bower, I'm afraid . . ."

"Will he know me ? Shall I speak to him ?"

"I can't think that he'll know you—maybe he might. I don't think I'd be bothering the poor gentleman."

She hadn't spoken to him, she had just stroked the swollen hand with her finger-tips, and thought that it felt cold; then the room had seemed to fill with people—Robert, and David, Dr. Walsh, and Sir Charles.

She had moved back while they bent over the bed and whispered, and once Sir Charles said: "Just a little more this way, Walsh—now!"

Her own voice had broken the silence which followed into pieces, shattered it roughly.

"Unless you can cure him, I don't want him just kept alive, please!"

The great doctor, urbane and dignified, with a large, flat white face, turned and looked at her, reproof in his eyes.

"We only wish to—er—prolong life—"

She felt Wilfred's arm through hers, heard him say in his stolid, unemotional voice: "My mother's right, Sir Charles—those—injections won't save him. We don't want him worried."

"Very well . . ." The tone was grave and offended, it was evident that Sir Charles Manders was both hurt and disapproving. He moved away and stood near the open window with Walsh; she and Wilf went forward to the bed. Wilfred altered his position; she couldn't see Edward, Wilf was in front of her, and then he turned and put his arms round her.

"There—it's all right, darling. Come with me—it's over. You shall come back afterwards."

She knew that it was Wilfred who had moved Edward's chair from the lawn—the chair that was made from *Victory* oak. Edward laughed at it when it first came and said: "Let's hope it will obey Nelson's order, and every splinter do its duty to—uphold my weight." It was Wilfred who had interviewed newspaper-men, undertakers, the Vicar, and who now stood by while his father's workmen walked into the billiard-room, and looked for the last time at the man who had been their master. Wilfred was coming out of the house now, with four elderly men, walking towards her.

"Mother, these are the foremen from Bower's, would you speak to them?"

"Of course. Bring them over here."

"That's nice of you." He beckoned to the foremen, who moved forward a little stiffly; they evidently agreed that one should act as spokesman. A little grizzled man, with a short beard and bright brown eyes, holding his bowler hat so that she could see the brilliant, scarlet-silk lining, he stood before her and cleared his throat. "Yer laadyship, we're 'ere terdaay on this sad business. Me an' my mates 'ere wish—i' t' naame o' Bower's—ter convey ter you our respe'tful sympathy. Your loss isourn—you've lost a reit good man, an' we've lost a reit good measter. Wi' your permission we—that is Bower's—'ud taake it as a privilege ter carry t' measter tiv 'is laast restin'-plaace, if so be that you're agreeable."

Claudia nodded. "We—my son and I—shall be very happy if you will."

Automatically, the old man stepped back smartly, and another slightly younger man took his place, as if, she thought, this had all been rehearsed.

"Wi'oot wishin' ter intrewde, Ah might add that this 'ere permission will gi'e uz all a gert sense o' satisfaction an' gratification."

"It's very kind of you—very kind. I hope that you've all had something—some refreshment—it's a long way from Crudlethorpe."

"Naay, missus," one of them said. "We're not 'ere ter mak' this a reason fur a drink, thankin' you all the saame. It's an ower dowly daay fur thinkin' o' supping and eating. Choose 'ow."

Gravely they shook hands with her, gravely they shook hands with Wilfred, then walked off in silence, dignified, rather dour, and wholly sincere. As she watched them, Claudia thought: 'I was right to come here, they're the people I understand, they've the same blood as my own. Even Wilf can't understand them as I can. They'd stand by you—they might curse you among themselves, but they'll never allow outsiders to talk against you.'

II

It was all over. Once again, as more than twenty years ago, she had walked among farmers, yeoman, landowners and the officials from Bower's. This time with Robert on one hand and Wilfred on the other. Again people had whispered that it was a "queer waay fur a woman ter goa on, wimmen moastly shut theirselves oop whiles it's all ower". And others replied: "Maybe ay, maybe noa—rules an' what other folks does matters nout ter Claudia Bower. She's a law unto 'ersen, that one is—an' reitly."

Slowly the big room had cleared, cars, landaus, Victorias, dog-carts and gigs had driven off, and she was left alone with Robert, Wilfred, old Veysey of Clartbeck, and Wilson of Hartburn. Outside on the terrace she saw David's tall figure pass and re-pass with Henri Pinto. Fernanda had gone to her room, and Hugh and Owen had wandered off, subdued and silent, to the stables where Vanity's grand-daughter had a litter of puppies.

Veysey said hoarsely, his gouty hand holding his glass of port :

"It's a matter of twenty years since I was in this room, and on the saame sad arrand."

Wilson said, "Naay, mower—twenty-one."

"Longer than that since my father's funeral," Robert told them, his voice sounding thin and high-pitched in contrast to their heavier tones.

"Fernanda was a baby," Claudia said, and she felt Robert's hand on her arm, wondered if he remembered how she had left them down in this very room, and gone to feed 'Nanda. She was a widow then, now she was a widow once more. Suddenly she felt old, looked at Veysey and Wilson and recalled that in the old days there had been more of these men who had been her father's friends. Wilson of Hartburn, Veysey of Clartbeck, Thorpe of Brigend, Bower of Seston, and Marsden of Marlingly. They had been "cronies". They had gambled, drunk, raced together, and now only these two mouthing old

men, with trembling hands and rheumy eyes, were left. The son of Thorpe was her bailiff, and Bower's son had been buried that morning.

They were stumbling to their feet, Veysey and Wilson. Robert and Wilfred were going with them to the door, and she was left alone, looking at the long expanse of damask-covered table. It was as if Thomas Marsden's funeral had repeated itself. Then the responsibility had been left for her to shoulder—now she would shoulder responsibilities again.

She realized, with a sense of shock, that she had been allowing her thoughts to turn to her father for the first time for many years, and that she was able to think of him calmly. Not certainly with affection, but without being consumed by that feeling of burning hate and anger. He had lived, he had wasted his life, his substance, he had taken love—or what passed for love—where he found it, and he had gone and was forgotten except by a couple of old men who tottered and stumbled as they walked. In less than two generations Thomas Marsden was forgotten.

She shrugged her shoulders : "Well—so much the better!"

The days passed. Fernanda, Henri and the children went back to London, Wilfred returned to Oxford, Owen and Hugh were at school again, Robert busy at the works, and David immersed in his machine that should one day make flying possible. Wilfred wrote very often. Whenever it was possible he begged her to go to Oxford to spend days with him. Robert was kind, David came over every day, and there was always Stockie—but Claudia was lonely. Edward had been her charge, she had considered him in everything. She had gone with him to London, he had come with her to France, they had talked over all her plans for Marlingly, and now she knew that the blank which his death had left was terrible.

Robert said : "Shut up Marlingly for a bit, and come to Seston."

She shook her head : "Robbie dear, I couldn't live at Seston without Edward ! It's too hideous !"

Fernanda suggested : "Henri and I wish you'd come to Town, darling. We'd take you out of yourself—make you forget your loneliness."

"I don't like London much, 'Nanda—why don't you and the children come to Marlingly?"

'Nanda wrinkled her nose. "Because—well, I don't like Marlingly much, my angel."

"Then we'll all stay where we are and we shall all be satisfied."

Stockie said: "I wonder that you don't travel, Lady Bower. A really long sea-voyage—what is there to prevent you?"

Claudia smiled at her anxious face. "Oh, bless you, leave me alone, all of you. I'm only missing Edward rather badly just now. Why don't I go a long sea-voyage, eh? I'll tell you—because I should loathe it. I hate the sea. I should smoke too much, drink too much, from sheer boredom. As to what there is to keep me—damn it all, Stockie, pull yourself together. Nothing! Only Coster's, and Bower's—for I haven't the slightest intention of giving Robert his head over that—my farm, Marlingly—oh, nothing to keep me, is there, you idiot!"

Then, when Edward had been dead over a year, when the gardens were looking their best, when Claudia was beginning to feel that all her old interest and energy were returning, David came over one evening to dine.

They sat on the terrace, where the scent of the tobacco plants, the night-scented stocks and the "Mrs. Sinkins" reached them, and drank the coffee which Stockie always made herself, because Claudia swore that no one else had ever learnt how coffee should either taste or look.

David, his long legs stretched before him, sat staring down into the scented dusk, while Claudia, a cigarette between her fingers, leant back gently pulling the ears of Vanity's grand-daughter, wondering if in all the world there was a lovelier place than Marlingly.

"Thoughtful, David? Those Suffragists been bothering you again?"

"No." He turned, half smiling. "We're all growing just a little tired of their vagaries, I think."

"Let your stupid Governments and Home Secretaries and the rest of 'em come to their senses then!" she retorted. "I've

half a mind to go to Town and join them. I believe I would, only Thorpe isn't reliable enough to leave to run the farms."

David moved a little restlessly in his chair, set down his coffee-cup and twisted round so that he faced her.

"Claudia—listen to me a moment—don't interrupt, because it's difficult. I want to ask if you'll marry me. We're neither of us growing any younger, we're both rather alone—Claudia, will you?"

Momentarily the old panic swept over her, then she recovered herself.

"Loneliness isn't really an excuse for marriage, Davy."

"But love is. . . ."

"I'm not in love with you," Claudia said calmly, "and you're not in love with me, either. We love each other, as—" she drew a deep breath, because it was all so easy, there was no sense of pain or loss, she was speaking the truth—"as Robert and I love each other."

"Do we?" he asked, his voice a little wistful, as if he regretted something that was over and done with. "Do we?"

She threw away her cigarette, watching it fall into the dusk, and lie glowing on the path below like a little bright eye. Then she laid her hand on his arm, and spoke very softly and earnestly.

"Davy, you know that's true. In your heart. You asked me to marry you just now, because—well, because of something that happened years ago, something that you look back on with a kind of tenderness. But it's over—done with. Its place is in the years that are past. We couldn't go back and drag it into the present, and take it with us into the future. It died long ago, it was a sort of dream, that we both dreamt and from which we both woke long ago. We moved on to another footing, our affection for each other is on a different plane now. We—we are—brother and sister."

He watched her gravely, then nodded. David Betterton was far too honest to refuse to admit the truth. "Claudia, I believe you're right. Brother and sister—yes. It began quite a time ago, that feeling—began when I used to do little jobs for you in Town; then one morning I knew that I was just a little

irritated because you gave me a list of things to do as long as your arm. One feeling died, and another grew up in its place. Oh, don't think that it's not very strong, very deep, very real—but you're right, perhaps you've always been right—it's not the same as it once was."

She laughed from the sheer relief of it. The plant which had grown so tall, so sinister, in the dark, had finally shrivelled, curled its last yellow leaf and died. "Then admit," she said, "that you asked me to marry you from a certain sense of duty, Davy!"

"No, no," he protested, "I won't. From a certain sentimentality, shall we say. A kind of requiem mass for that young man in dirty overalls who got so roundly abused by the beautiful Mrs. Francis Coster!"

"Mrs. Francis Coster!" Claudia repeated. "What a long time ago! I'm growing old, Davy—I've outlived two husbands. If I married again now, people would begin to think that I was a sort of Mrs. Maybrick or whoever the woman was! No, we're better as we are—anyway, as we have admitted that we regard each other as brother and sister, the idea is slightly, well—"

David stopped her. "Claudia, dear—please!"

"I forgot that you disapprove of my plain speaking," she said. "You know you are like Stockie—you like me but you often disapprove of me."

"I don't think so—really—no—"

"Oh, really—yes! It's growing chilly—come in and play me a hundred up."

III

Wilfred refused to take kindly to Bower's. He tried to like it, he said, but he hated the noise, and anyway David and Robert managed very well without him.

"But"—Claudia tapped with her fingers on the polished table—"but—can't you see that I want someone to follow Robert and David?"

Wilfred shook his head, and laughed. "Sorry, angel, but it won't be me. I'm not cut out for it. When Robert's finished

with it, then we'll turn it into a Limited Liability Company and draw our dividends."

"Not so long as I'm alive!"

"Let me be your bailiff. Thorpe can't manage now you've taken in so much more land. He's lazy and not too competent. Give me a chance."

He watched her jaw harden, her eyes narrow. "Are you ready to start from the bottom? I'm not making a place for you, I'll take you on your merits, nothing else. Just think it over, Wilf—Sir Wilfred Bower carting manure won't be so pleasant, the same gentleman clarted with clay to the eyes won't look so pleasant, neither will he feel so pleasant when it's six o'clock on a winter's morning and he—"

"All right, darling, don't gild the lily! Try me, that's all."

And Wilfred had done well, he had set his teeth and not spared himself. Early morning, when the rime lay thick on the grass, Claudia had heard him go past her door, treading softly; she had watched how he never came home before his time, and how he applied himself to books and Government reports during the evening. Not brilliant perhaps, she reflected, but steady, persevering and reliable.

His only interest in Bower's was their production of new machinery for use in farming or dairy work, and Robert swore that Wilf was their best advertising agent. "One of your pet bugbears for me is wiped out," Wilf told Claudia. "Bower's have a manure-spreader ready—how's that for improving the lot of the poor farmer's boy?" or "Pasteurizing's the thing. Let's install a machine in the dairy, and advertise the fact that our milk's safe." They were ready to laugh at his idea for introducing a milking machine, even David felt that he was carrying things rather too far, but Wilfred stuck to his point, and when Claudia saw the machinery working and noticed the regularity of its movements, the rapidity and the general air of cleanliness which accompanied it, she was forced to admit that Wilfred was right. He had no particular love for raising beasts, his real passions were the dairy and his poultry farm, which had grown to enormous proportions. The horses interested him, but he was never a good horseman, and they occupied such a

secondary place in his affection that Claudia finally cleared the stock and let him concentrate on his milk and egg production.

"Where other men go to Town to see a musical comedy, to dine or dance, Wilfred only goes to examine the latest type of chicken-house, incubators, or dairy machinery. The idea of a new kind of milk-bottle thrills him, he grows lyrical over some horrible fresh breed of bird that—if you can believe all he tells you—lays about three eggs a day," Claudia told Robert.

Robert grumbled. "He ought to be in the firm—not that Bower's is such a catch in these days!"

"Why?" Claudia asked sharply. "The profits are all right—I'm satisfied."

"Profits—yes," Robert said, "but it's like walking on eggs. The men demand this, the men won't have that, they want committees for this and that and the next thing! Oh, my dear, poor Edward would have made short work of their fads and demands."

"Edward knew how to treat his men! I know Yorkshire men, Robbie. Treat 'em right, and they'll stand by you. Lead them, don't be such a fool as to try to drive them. Yet they like masters who can 'hit 'em and hold 'em', but they want their corn and water, just as willing horses do."

"By Gad, they get their corn and water all right!" he ejaculated. "Their confounded labour members see to that. I tell you the country's going Socialist."

"If it's better for the country—let it. Henri and I have no bother at Coster's. We have seventy men there, we pay decent wages and expect decent work."

"Coster's isn't a factory." Then, "I wonder you don't give up Coster's. I should think you could get rid of it quite easily, if you wanted to."

She frowned at him. Give up Coster's! Give up the place that she had watched over and cared for, hand over her beloved cellars, her huge bins, her packing-rooms and bottling-department to someone else? Not likely.

She was forty-seven, she had worked for and in Coster's for nearly thirty years, had gone there as a girl, a novice, who didn't even know the reason why champagne must be kept horizontal, who thought that to serve it in those wide, open

Victorian glasses with hollow stems was the only perfect method. She had not known that "cold" meant one thing and "iced" something quite different, the white splash on a port bottle had meant nothing to her, and she had believed that all wine arrived in England ready to be placed on the table. Now—well, she'd back her opinion against Henri's any day, even old Isidore Pinto had to admit that her judgment was the soundest he knew, "though never has your palate been the equal of our so regretted Ferdinand Coster's".

"Thanks, Robbie," she said. "When I want to get rid of Coster's I'll let you know. Damn it!" with sudden energy, "I'd sell Bower's first."

Robbie annoyed her sometimes. Not that she didn't love him, she never looked at his fine figure, his bright hair, good skin and immaculate clothes without a sense of satisfaction, but he seemed to be losing interest in Bower's. Bower's was too safe, no need to press Bower's goods, everyone bought them. "Bower's are the best" was true enough—good enough for the farmers at all events. Bower's Self-Binder, Bower's Self-Rake Reaper, Bower's Corn-Shocker, Bower's Stalk-Cutter, Bower's Patent Cake-Cutter, Bower's Power Separator and Bower's Butyrometer; then David's earlier inventions—the Skimmer, the "Quick Bring" Churn, the Betterton-Bower "Easy to Clean" Can—they were still going. The motor-car engines were scarcely produced by them nowadays, they had let them go to works better fitted for the production, but David was still improving the air engine, and though it was not and never had been one of the fastest, it was reliable, people believed in it.

Owen would do better than Robert; he was new to it, keen—just a little bit too keen, Claudia thought sometimes. She had watched him in the works, his dark eyes darting everywhere—somehow she didn't feel that the men cared much for him. His efficiency was so cold, his attitude so impersonal. Robert admired Owen, rather applauded him because he had refused to go to Cambridge and entered the works two years ago. Hugh had gone readily enough, and slacked, so Robert said, consistently, learnt nothing either there or at school—"nothing worth while, anyway".

Yet, when Hugh came home and stayed at Marlingly, they

got on very well. She thought his clothes too decorative, his ties too flamboyant, and once or twice she had sniffed and said: "For heaven's sake, Hugh—you've not taken to scent, have you?"

Not in the least abashed, he had smiled and nodded. "Darling, in hot weather it's so refreshing. Father uses scent, anyway."

"Eau de Cologne, nothing else."

"It's scent, though," he persisted, "just the same. My"—and he said some high-falutin French name, pronouncing it like a damned Frenchman, too!—"is no more scent and no less scent than his wretched eau de Cologne."

Claudia wrinkled her nose. "I don't like it! I don't like those heliotrope silk shirts, either—or that silly tie."

Hugh smiled back at her disgusted face. "But me," he said, "you like me, don't you? You can differentiate between me and my shirts and scent and ties, can't you?"

"I try to."

"What are you going to do, Hugh?" Claudia asked.

He laughed. "You're always wanting people to do things, aren't you, my dear, never content to let them just—be something?"

"There's no difference, is there? You can be an engineer, or engineering may be what you do!" Again he listened to her fingers drumming impatiently on the table, and yet, Hugh thought, Claudia wasn't really impatient, she just possessed so much vitality, so much drive, that she hated not to be driving along at full tilt all the time.

He leant back, twisting the stem of his wine-glass in his long fingers, making the wine circle very carefully and delicately, appreciating its colour as the light caught it and changed it from deep red to shining rubies. "Me—do—be—whatever it is?" he queried softly. "I should like to live here, and have the most beautiful herbaceous borders in England. To have wonderful roses, and keep the lawns inviolate from those Goths who want to make flower-beds in the middle of them. I should like to watch the old furniture, to see that it didn't get the worm in it, to mend the old tapestry seats when they showed signs of wearing, to arrange the glass and china, to buy more from time to time—but"—very quickly—"only the

right kinds, not Dresden or Sèvres for instance. Only English stuff. To go through all the books in the library and throw out the ones that have just drifted there, and are no use or pleasure to anyone. Really, I suppose to identify myself with Marlingly—that's what I'd like."

Claudia frowned. "Arranging glass, china, gardening—my dear boy, it's not a career! It's precious little more than woman's work, that life you talk of."

"Woman's work!" Hugh mocked her. "Is this our Suffragist Claudia speaking! Isn't woman's work, making things lovely and caring for them and making places beautiful, just as important as banging strips of metal, and turning handles and wrenching at levers? You've shocked me profoundly!"

She sat watching him, her level brows drawn together, her eyes puzzled. He was so different from Wilfred, from Owen, even from his father, Robert. Difficult to place, and yet so easy to talk with, such a good companion.

"Does that mean you really love Marlingly?" she asked, her voice suddenly very soft and tender.

"Love it! I've always adored it. As much as I've always loathed Seston. It's so mellow, so content to be itself. It doesn't pretend to be one of the stately homes of England, it doesn't pretend to be a modern residence complete with every convenience, it isn't 'quaint', or 'cunning', or 'adaptable'. It's just itself—not very big, not particularly small, not really a great architectural achievement, and yet possessing character. I always feel here that time is something tangible that one can almost take hold of it and say: 'Look what a lovely, huge piece of time I have to spend.' Even the big clock in the hall ticks slowly and, if you listen, it sometimes just misses a tick, because it's busy thinking of something other than catching trains, and posts, and making telephone calls. Watch the minute hand, it stands quite still now and then—lost in admiration of that bit of the garden it can see through the open door—then it remembers and jerks forward, as if it said 'Oh, confound this stupid time business—I forgot all about it.' He stopped and laughed, "Oh, I know quite a lot about my beloved Marlingly."

"I didn't realize," Claudia said slowly, "that anyone felt like that about it—except me."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

1913 was a bad year somehow, Claudia reflected. Here it was, October, the leaves changing to red and gold, the skies each evening splashed with crimson, orange and scarlet, the air nippy in the mornings, deceptively warm at midday, and the evenings bringing wisps of mist which trailed over the gardens and lawns. Autumn, and Hugh was still playing at life, spending a good deal of time with Fernanda and Henri, rushing back to Seston and after twenty-four hours leaving it for Marlingly, because he hated its red-brick ugliness and couldn't get on with his twin brother.

Robert perpetually sunk in gloom, then suddenly Robert, too, going to London, declaring that he needed a holiday, not staying at Portland Square but living in a place called "a service flat", where his meals were sent up from a kind of communal kitchen. A nice way to live ! He said that Owen could manage very well with David's help. Claudia wondered. Owen wasn't popular, and David was inclined to be vague, to think more of his own workshop than the works. There was a soft, impractical streak in David—she thought that possibly all inventors were like that, immersed in their own concerns to the exclusion of everything else.

Coster's still paid, and paid well, but Fernanda was extravagant, she liked Portland Square filled with people, entertained largely, had a passion for racing, and played cards for stakes which seemed to Claudia far too high. Henri, always devoted, making no secret of the fact that he adored her, would have given her the moon to play with if she'd wanted it. Jane and Bobbie, amusing, clever, pretty little things, but utterly spoilt, taken everywhere, allowed to express opinions on every subject under the sun. Not like children at all—like little models of a man and a fashionable young woman.

When she had been there last, Jane had announced calmly at luncheon that as soon as she was seventeen she was going to marry some man called William S. Hart, or, failing him, Lewis Stone.

"Who are they?" Claudia asked.

"Film people," Fernanda said. "Jane's crazy about the cinema."

Bobbie, in a wide Eton collar and short black coat, had asked for money to go to some music-hall, because he wanted to see the "Ascots, that spiffing dancing act, mummy. I must go!"

He had done a little dance—if you could call it dancing—his feet tapping away on the parquet floor, his arms wagging about like these American professional dancers. Jane had imitated people of whom Claudia had never heard—actresses, and musical-comedy stars—and everyone had listened as if it were a miracle. Very boring, and damned bad for both Jane and Bobbie to have so much notice taken of them, Claudia thought.

Only Wilfred remained quite unchanged. He was solid, reliable, he did his work and did it well. Other people might grumble at prices, at restrictions, might say that no farming really paid—the Marlingly land paid well enough. She was growing to respect her son more and more, knew that their affection for each other was founded on a mutual liking and understanding. It would never be the passionate love she felt and still retained for Fernanda. 'Nanda was so brilliant, so beautiful, so attractive, with her ready laugh, her clothes, which Claudia thought were undoubtedly expensive, but equally undoubtedly hideous.

"If they were all like you, Wilf," Claudia said one evening, after she had been in London, and had visited Bower's on her way to Marlingly, "I should find life a pleasanter business."

His heavy, plain face flushed, and his rather light-grey eyes shone with obvious pleasure. "Nice to hear you say that, mother. Though I'm a dull dog. Know nothing of books—except manuals on poultry; nothing of pictures—except the photographs in the *Feathered World*; and the only music I understand is the hum of dairy machinery. They're all much more interesting than I am, y'know."

"Oh, interesting—a puppy chasing its tail's interesting for

a time, so is a cock crowing on a midden, so is a child swaggering about playing at soldiers—but you get sick of 'em very quickly."

"Are those similes?" he asked. "If so, who has been doing all these things?"

"Sort them out for yourself," Claudia said irritably. "What with one and another of them, damned if I don't feel like selling everything and living on capital!"

"I fancy that even if you did sell everything," Wilfred said smoothly, "you might still have sufficient to live—exist—on income."

But she had the bit in her teeth and was revelling in her annoyance.

"It only needs you to tell me that you're going to marry a chorus girl," she continued, "and then I should be entirely sick of the lot of you."

"I think I'll leave marriage to the really successful members of the family," he said. "I'm just Lady Bower's bailiff, y'know."

And the next morning, when Wilfred and she sat with Stockie at luncheon, a telegram came from Robert to say that he was engaged to be married, and that he was coming north to tell her all about it.

Claudia flung down the telegram and said: "Well, I'm damned! There's no fool like an old fool, choose how!" She had allowed her speech to broaden considerably of late years, and when she was annoyed spoke a dialect as pronounced as that used in the Marlingly kitchens.

Stockie said mildly, "He's only forty-five or -six, that's not very old."

"Old enough to know better!" Then, turning to Wilfred, who stood before the fire, looking bulky and over broad in his rough tweed coat, breeches and box-cloth leggings, "You see! Robert 'ul have married a chorus girl."

"My dear, you've got those young women on the brain!" he protested.

However, when Robert arrived he had not chosen a chorus girl, he was engaged, it appeared, to a most elegant and fashionable lady—a friend, or at least an acquaintance, of Lady Hartland's—Mrs. Florence Corder Cable.

"Corder Cable!" Claudia repeated. "It's not English——"

"American," Robert explained. "Her husband was Corder Cable, of Corder, Cable and Corder."

"Sounds a lunatic's name to me! Go on, Robert. Who are these Corders and Cables?—what did he do?—who was he?"

"Makers of the Corder and Cable boots and shoes," Robert said.

"If you use either of those words again during the rest of this conversation, I shall have hysterics, Robbie," Claudia said. "Well, old C. C. is dead, I suppose. Now go on from there."

Slightly self-conscious, Robert continued. Florence was charming, there was no other word for her. Fernanda had met her, had declared that she was both smart and attractive. He was devoted to her, and she—

"She gave you that black-pearl pin?" Claudia asked. "Well, it's far too big, Robbie. Looks ostentatious. Are you going to live at Seston?"

He stammered a little, his pale face flushed, and his whole bearing was that of a man who finds it difficult to state his case. It appeared that Florence disliked the whole of England expect "Town".

"Meaning, I suppose, London, eh?" Claudia asked. "There are other towns."

Florence wished to travel, she felt that Robert had worked sufficiently, that it was time he saw something of the world, had a little amusement, in short—she proposed a world tour.

"Then Bower's loses its managing director, and its general manager?"

"There's Owen—he's capable, energetic, young, interested in his work."

"When I want Owen's character," Claudia said, "I'll write it out myself. Let's get down to brass tacks. You want to stop work. Well, I don't blame you. We both started young, and if you want to retire—that's your business. Put Seston on the market—David wouldn't live there, he prefers his own place in Marbury. You can have what it fetches for a wedding present. Keep your shares in Bower's—they're too good to sell. There you are, Robbie, that's settled."

He came over to where she sat, and stood looking down at her. "Wish me luck, Claudiie," he said.

Her manner changed, she ceased to be brisk and hard, efficient and businesslike, she was soft and tender, her voice lost its harsh note.

"I do, Robbie, of course I do. I want you to be happy, you've a right to be. Don't stay away too long, that's all. I shall miss you—even if I haven't seen much of you lately I've liked to know that you were get-at-able. Never let yourself be short of money, old fellow. What's mine you can always count on, if you need it. Don't let Mrs. What's-her-name spoil you—pay your own bills, pay the piper, and then you've a right to call the tune." She paused, then asked a little wistfully, "Will you live in New York, Robbie?"

"Possibly. Florence has an apartment there—what we call a flat. But I shall be over every year, be sure of that. Must keep coming back to have a look at my handsome sister. You might even marry again yourself, Claudie."

"No—I shan't do that. Two marriages denote a certain success, three mean that you're making a habit of it. There's something slightly foolish about women who marry three times, y'know."

II

Robert had married, and Portland Square had been crowded with people. Mrs. Corder Cable was tall, elegant and cold, her friends and relations seemed like the sands of the sea. Claudia watched them all, smart, expensively dressed, saw Robert trail round at his wife's heels being shown off and wished that he could have married someone just a little younger.

"She's fifty if she's a day," Fernanda said.

Claudia nodded. "Yes—I'm not sure that a chorus girl wouldn't have been more fun for him. Poor old Robbie——"

"Owen looks as if he despised the lot of us," Fernanda went on.

"He always does. That's how he looks at the men in the works, confound him. I shall have to give more time to Bower's. I may not understand the machinery, but I understand the men who work there."

Henri, whose dark hair was already beginning to recede from his high forehead, said: "That is unfortunate that you

must work so hard, dear mama. But never worry over Coster's—even though the years have brought new difficulties, new and keener competition, we still hold our own, and more than hold it."

She nodded, and said as she had said so often: "You're a good fellow."

A week later she had her first quarrel with Owen.

She drove over, dressed plainly and inconspicuously, her bright hair dressed close to her head, her feet encased in what she called "sensible" shoes. Claudia did not believe in playing at work—when she went to Bower's, to Coster's or even down to inspect the dairy, she liked to dress suitably, and with an entire absence of frills or finery.

"Mr. Fluellyn in the works?" she asked one of the clerks.

"I think so, Lady Bower—shall I find him for you?"

"No. When he comes in say that I'm here."

She walked through into the shop, where the belts whirred overhead and the hum of machinery filled the air. Rows and rows of machines, drills, lathes, capstans, and at each a man or boy standing, intent on his work. Trolleys, barrows and trucks were constantly going up and down the shop, collecting and delivering work and materials; in the store she could see the white-coated assistant moving about, taking slips of paper from men who stood at the window, walking to the shelves and selecting the materials demanded. Hallows, one of the foremen, saw her and came over to where she stood. Claudia nodded to him, she was too well known in the works to excite any great interest, she was almost as familiar a figure as Owen Fluellyn himself.

"Busy, Hallows?"

"Full time—hard at it, y'ladyship."

"No night shift?"

"Not at the moment, we can manage without."

"Time and piece combination work all right? The shop committee approve?"

Hallows nodded. "They approve all right. Mind, it won't work for the tool-shop, winders, nor paint-shop. No more will it for test—but for actual jobs—numbered jobs—it's good enough."

She walked on, down the long line of drills, where the men

were perched on high stools, and halted beside a machine where a clerk stood, watch in hand, his note-book laid open on the bench.

“Timing, Mr. Hewson ?”

“Yes, Lady Bower.”

The man at the machine lifted the drills, extracted a metal plate, and laid it aside. He was a young man, with quick fingers, and an air of energy about every movement. Before he could insert another plate, Claudia said : “Just a minute—what’s your name ?”

“ ’Arrison, m’laady.”

“What are you—twenty-five ?”

He grinned. “Twenty-three, m’laady.”

“That job tricky ?”

He pursed his lips and eyed the plate reflectively. “Fairish tricky.” Then, as if gaining courage, he continued, “It’s seven holes—four on ‘em’s different, means inserting a fresh drill, then it’s smallish—the plaate—and the holes ‘as got ter be exact. Ay, Ah’d saay as it’s fairish tricky.”

Claudia turned to the clerk. “What do you make it ?”

“I was just going to test another, m’lady. I make it twelve.”

“Twelve to the hour ? Rubbish !”

The man at the machine laughed. “Ah’m pretty nippy wi’ ‘em,” he said.

“Who is the best man on the drills ?” she demanded.

Harrison laughed again. “Ah am, m’laady—b’ a long chalk.”

“Wipe out that test,” she told the clerk, “you must take another. Leave it for the moment, and send Gilkes to me—he is the chairman of the shop committee, isn’t he ?”

“Yes, Lady Bower——” The clerk fumbled for words a little. “But this was Mr. Fluellyn’s order, it was to be put through and booked pretty quickly. Job Number 8901.”

“I don’t care if it’s Job Number eight million and one ! Hold it up ! Find Gilkes.”

Back in the office she sat down in the big chair which had been Edward’s, and lit a cigarette, then rang the bell and ordered tea to be sent down from the canteen. “And tell cook to make it strong.”

“Now, Mr. Gilkes ! Sit down. You’re the men’s representative, the chairman, and I have to come down and teach

you your business. What's the matter with you people? Can't you have some arrangement as to whom times are taken from? That man, Harrison, is obviously the quickest man on the bench."

Gilkes looked at her, the corners of his mouth drawn down. She summed him up as stupid and inefficient. "Naay, y'ladyship," he said, "times is allus taken fra' Harrison fur t' drillers."

"Then it's your business to see that he isn't the standard for timing."

"Why," he mumbled, "it weer Mister Owen as settled it!"

And as he spoke, Owen entered, saw Gilkes and frowned, then recovered himself. "Anything wrong, Aunt Claudia?" he asked. "They said that you were here and wished to speak to me."

"I do." Her voice was crisp and incisive; she sat there in Edward Bower's big chair, a cigarette in her fingers, a thick cup of black, strong tea at her elbow, and her vitality seemed to permeate the whole room.

Owen disliked having women in the works, he had always resented Claudia's presence at Board Meetings, always felt that his father had been far too ready to listen to her fads and fancies. "More than half Socialist," he stigmatized her; "she and Uncle Edward have always pandered to the men."

She nodded to Gilkes. "You can go—I think less of the men for making you their chairman." Then, as the door closed, "My God, don't they make one furious! Here, their own people fight for them—Edward always fought for them—any decent employer wants them to have their due, and a bit over, and they choose a muddle-headed old fool like that to look after their interests! Makes me furious. Now, Owen, this timing won't do. Bower's don't take their time from the quickest man—leave alone the question of what's fair to the men, it's bad, it means scamped work, means rejects from test, waste and a dozen other things. I thought that you'd have seen that."

She had meant to keep her voice almost conciliatory, to have spoken with persuasion, but the sight of her nephew, dark-haired, bright-eyed, with his tight lips, and his general air of inflexibility, had made her forget. Owen, she thought, contrived

to look so—what was the word?—dapper. Not actually well dressed, as Robert had always been, but over-neat, too tidy, too well washed and brushed for the works. She remembered how often she had seen Edward come into this very office, his face and hands grimed with oil, dust and dirt. Even now she could see him, struggling out of his coat, washing and spluttering at the basin in the corner, panting a little :

“No good trying to keep clean in the works! I’m filthy!”

Owen lit a cigarette with care, blew out the match and sat down opposite to her. “You’re thinking of Harrison, on the drills, I fancy?”

“Ay”—she lapsed into the Yorkshire affirmative instinctively.

“You’d prefer that we took the time from old Wilcox, who’s really past his work.” His dark eyes were angry and intolerant. “My dear aunt, I’m afraid if we adopted those methods you’d find Bower’s paying remarkably small dividends.” He laughed. “I am in charge, after all—and I don’t think the men have much to complain of. As for Gilkes, well—he’s a good fellow, we don’t want anyone like Johns—a Bolshie—do we?”

His tone of tolerant reproval stung her, she sprang to her feet, the cup of strong tea overturned, and she smothered an exclamation more fitted for a man than a woman. “You’re in charge!” she exclaimed. “Damn it, leave the tea—it won’t hurt anything! Let’s get this right. I don’t care if the men haven’t much to complain of, I won’t have anything left that they *can* complain of. We’re going through a ticklish time, let me tell you; we’ve got to watch our steps, not leave anything for anyone to use as a handle against us. It’s going to be a case of going every inch of the way, as far as is possible, *with* Labour—or they’ll make trouble for us. Manager, works manager, I don’t give a tuppenny damn which you are, I’m still Claudia Bower, I’m still the controlling interest, I’m still the—damn it, I’m still the owner!”

“Forgive me”—he had taken a clean duster out of a cupboard and was mopping up the tea. “Would you like another cup? I didn’t know that you were interested in the actual working here. I thought you were the specialist at Coster’s.”

“Oh, the devil take it!” she cried. “Working here! What d’you mean? I’m not a blasted fool, I can see what’s held

plainly in front of my nose, can't I? Edward Bower made this place, and I didn't live with him for all those years without knowing something about the working of the place. Just get that into your head, Owen—what I say—goes! Get that timing done as I order you, and don't let me find anything so damned silly, so damned unfair, or so damned wasteful from the management's point of view, happening again. If you haven't enough gumption to find your average men, I'll come down and find 'em for you. That's all! I want no more argument!"

She left the place, her head held high, her cheeks flaming, half inclined to go down to the works and take Edward's place. The idea remained with her, and at dinner she mentioned it to Stockie and Wilf. Stockie raised her eyebrows: "Oh, my dear, it would be dreadfully tiring."

Wilfred, looking less familiar in his severe black and white, said:

"Seeking new worlds, eh? How'd my estimable cousin like it?"

"Oh, to the devil—what he likes!" Claudia ejaculated.

"But if he resented your presence there," Stockie said gently, "it might be rather—well—difficult for you."

Wilfred laughed. "Oh, Stockie, Stockie, what a frightful mistake! Go on like that and she'll be down at the works tonight!" Then, to his mother, "I think you'd find my dairies more interesting—why not try coming down to them?"

"Because," Claudia retorted, "you run them to my satisfaction. I don't trust Owen, I do and can trust you." She looked at them both as if she had thrown out a challenge and looked to one of them to contest it. "There! It's obvious that you both feel the same. I begin at Bower's tomorrow, let Owen make what he likes of it."

And begin at Bower's she did, the following morning. She might be forty-seven, but to be driven over to Cradlethorpe every morning was no hardship to Claudia Bower, and nine o'clock found her seated in Edward's old chair, with David and Owen facing her, stating her case lucidly and plainly. She might be wrong, time would prove, but Bower's was hers, it had been left to her by Edward; true, other people had shares in it, but she was the chief shareholder. Again she might be

wrong, but she liked things which were hers run in her way, and Bower's should be no exception to that rule. Owen sat, his eyes hard, his lips compressed, while David, the tips of his fingers neatly fitted together, listened and nodded.

"You see my point, David?" Claudia asked.

"Yes—oh yes, indeed I do," he agreed.

"And you, Owen?"

"Well, Aunt Claudia"—how she hated people to begin a sentence with "well . . ." as Owen invariably did—"I don't know how much of the practical side is within your grasp——"

"None of it——"

"Then—forgive me—I don't see quite what good purpose is to be served."

"Let me try to explain," she said, with slightly overdone patience. "I merely wish to be here, to know what is going on, to see what orders we take, how they are delivered, to have my finger—as it were—on the pulse of the works. I want to know what prices are charged in the canteen, and see if we can't reduce them—those are the things I want to know."

He smiled. "Yesterday, if I recollect rightly, it was a matter of timing which annoyed you."

David said, almost as if someone had shaken him out of a dream :

"Ah, that timing. I don't like this combination of time and piece——"

"I do, where it's possible," Claudia said; "it's that little extra reward that makes for better application—oh, the system is all right. It's the administration that's wrong. Well, take it or leave it—stay or go—I shall be here every day except Wednesdays and Thursdays, when I go to London to Coster's. Now, let me see these letters, Owen. All right, Davy, get along to your work-shop, I can see that you're aching to."

It worked fairly well. True there were times when her temper flared, when Owen argued, and she banged the table with the palm of her hand and swore at him and everyone else within reach, but on the whole she felt that her presence at the works was beneficial both to the work and the workers.

She believed in organization both in and out of the works.

"Half these men here," she said, "only live a stone's throw

from their work. They get home by a quarter past five, and they haven't an idea as to how to spend their evenings. Some of 'em have allotments, but only about five per cent. Give them new interests—only don't ever let them get the idea that you're trying to influence them. Once they think you're doing the 'Smiles Self Help' business, or 'educating them', they're off with the bit in their teeth. I'm putting in a couple of billiard-tables in the canteen—down at the end where there's plenty of room. I want the council to provide a municipal golf-links—oh, they've done it at some place near Liverpool. Cups, I'll offer them. I'll provide classes for the lads, but there's to be no 'asking' them to go. 'Come if you like—if you don't like, well, damned well stay away.' That's the way to treat Yorkshire workmen."

1914 dawned, the Suffragists continued their assaults on the Government, Claudia gave money, rubbed her hands whenever they had a success, and lashed herself into a passion each time the words "Cat and Mouse Act" were mentioned in her hearing. In June she took a brief holiday, and went to London to stay with Fernanda and Henri. Fernanda, lovelier than ever, her clothes more extravagant, her children more spoilt, and yet with a fascination and charm which was undeniable. Henri looked older, Claudia thought, as if he felt the weight of Coster's press heavily on him.

"Work getting too heavy for you, Henri?" Claudia asked.

"No, no, dear mama," he assured her eagerly, "but things appear to me to be growing difficult for this dear country. It is hard to say where the malice, the stubbornness, the—yes, indeed—the vindictiveness of some people, may lead us. There is trouble coming, and coming very soon."

"Where? Germany—France—?"

"No, not from there," he said. "When it comes it will come from Ireland. I have seen badges made and worn by the Unionists, the Bloody—please forgive the word!—Hand of Ulster, and the device 'Ulster will Fight and Ulster will be Right'—these things cannot go on, they are too provocative."

Claudia pooh-poohed it. Ireland had always given trouble, she said. Why, old James Bower used to say "Sink the whole island to the bottom of the sea, and they'd be settled once and

for all!" She wasn't sure that old James hadn't been right. Henri smiled his very sweet, gentle smile, and looked at her affectionately.

"My dear, if it were so easy as that—well!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Only—and I think that it was your Mr. George Bernard Shaw who said that if every Irishman died tomorrow, England would still be faced with the Irish problem—you cannot bind a nation, any more than you can exterminate a nation."

Back in Yorkshire she told Wilfred, who said that Henri's love for England made it almost impossible for him to see further than the Straits of Dover. Wilfred talked of Europe, lesser Powers, the Russians; all very vague it seemed to Claudia, who told him that he was a scaremonger and a war-monger and anything else that occurred to her at the time. On August 3rd, he said quietly: "Well, mother, the fleet's mobilized."

She said: "Who's done that—Churchill? The alarmist! Germany daren't fight."

"She dare and she will, my dear—she's got a huge army that hasn't justified its existence since the Franco-Prussian war."

"Nonsense," she persisted, "Grey 'ul pull it through. Trust Grey. Damn it, that play-acting Emperor is the King's cousin! How can he fight us?" But she was worried, and refused to go to bed, though she kept on saying that they were fools to bother and that we should never go to war.

Late that night the telephone rang, and Henri told them that war was declared. Russia, France and England against Austria and Germany. "And of course," Henri added, "Belgium is with us. We"—he said it with conscious pride—"have really gone to war that the little country of Belgium may be protected. It is magnificent, is it not?"

"If it's true," Claudia said, "the bigger fools the English! Think of what that old brute Leopold did on the Congo—"

Wilfred said: "Possibly, but he's dead, the present man's called Albert."

"As if that affects the issue," she snapped, and walked up the wide staircase to her own room, more shaken than she cared to admit, or wish to allow either Wilfred or Stockie to see

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER ONE

I

SOMETIMES Claudia sat in her chair at the works—Edward's chair—and wondered if it wasn't all a ghastly nightmare from which she must wake eventually. Bower's were making munitions, shells. David had invented a "time fuse" which appeared to have impressed people far more than any of his peace-time inventions. Girls sat at the benches fiddling about with tiny screws, little springs and bright metal caps, making this latest child of David's brain. There were girls at the drills, where young Harrison had once been the "star performer", there were girls on the lathes, girls in the coil-winding and test—girls everywhere. Men were going every day, and soon there were to be Tribunals to examine cases, and men who knew nothing about machinery were to decide whom Bower's could or could not do without ! Pretty business, if little Dr. Walsh, or old Kennedy the Vicar, were to tell her how to run the place !

Owen had tried to go. He had been restless, jumpy, nervous, and had declared that he wanted to get out to France. The authorities had refused him, as they refused David, because their work was necessary. Henri joined up in September, leaving Wilson to run Coster's. Poor Henri, so proud to join up in the British Army, looking so very unsoldier-like in his new uniform. She had gone up to London to see him, there had been a sort of farewell dinner-party—a terrible affair. Robert had been there, with his American wife, who had explained to everyone in a high nasal voice that America was "barred from participation by reason of the Munro doctrine". Bobbie Pinto had actually been allowed to make a speech, standing there, wearing a dinner-jacket with a red-white-and-blue buttonhole !

"I have only two wishes," he said. "One is that my father

may play his share in bringing the Kaiser to justice, and the other that the war won't be over for some years—so that I can join up and stand by his side!"

Florence Flueellyn said: "Well, isn't he the cutest thing ever?" Henri wiped his eyes, and Fernanda said, "Bravo, Bobbie, that's the stuff to give them!" Even Wilfred had laughed and applauded the preposterous child. Hugh had been there, paler than usual—his eyes looked tormented, almost frightened. "When are you going, Hugh?" He had laughed, and said: "Not a second before they make me, be certain of that, my dear Wilf! What about giving me a safe job at Marlingly?" Wilf's jaw had stuck out suddenly, his grey eyes had narrowed, and he turned away and began to tease Jane about her film stars.

Fernanda was apparently working herself to death—she had committees every day, she organized concerts, she found homes for Belgian refugees, but under it all 'Nanda was wretched. She might curse the Germans, might declare that "England must not sheathe the sword while one German remained alive", but she was miserable, Claudia knew that. She was worried to death over Henri, she actually tried to pull strings to get him moved on to the Staff; then Henri heard about it and refused, said he wanted to stay with his men, and even asked 'Nanda to mind her own business in future. He got leave—embarkation leave—and they came up to Marlingly, just 'Nanda and Henri. At night Claudia heard 'Nanda crying, and Henri's voice trying to comfort her. The morning they left, 'Nanda came down, looking magnificent in a tight hat with a tall feather up the back, and a new moleskin cape with an ermine collar. She laughed too loudly, teased Wilfred about his dairies, made a couple of rather doubtful jokes concerning cows, and then suddenly began to cry.

"Mother, I can't bear it—don't let him go. It's impossible—I can't live without Henri! He won't come back, I know that he won't come back!" And five minutes later she was telling Henri not to get mixed up with any Frenchwomen, and never to take Paris leave. What were you to make of girls like 'Nanda?

A week before Wilfred had told her that he was going to join

up. As they sat at luncheon: "It's no good, mother, I'm taking the afternoon off."

"My dear boy, why not? Take a holiday if you want one."

He smiled. "Rather a long one, darling. I'm chucking this job, it's too safe. I feel such a hound when I think of Henri. No, I've got to go."

"The Army?" She knew that she had sat and stared at him in silence, that he had continued to smile, as if to reassure her. At last she said:

"Well, if you must—I suppose you must."

They'd taken him, he was in the Artillery, training to go out almost at once. He had laughed and said that he didn't suppose he'd ever learn to hit a haystack, let alone a German. "That's because you've never encouraged me to be a real live sportsman, mother."

Stockie had fluttered over him, said that she was certain that he would win decorations and get promoted and come back covered with glory. When they were alone, he stood watching Claudia almost shyly.

"Nasty thing—last evening, mother."

"Damned nasty, Wilf."

"It's been a very good time, here with you, y'know. Pleasant, friendly. We're grand friends, aren't we?"

She clenched her hands, made a violent effort to speak calmly. "Since your father died, you've been the greatest comfort to me, the greatest help. I could never have got on without you, Wilf. I didn't realize how much Edward meant to me—until he went, then you took his place. Don't listen to Stockie—you don't want decorations, or promotions, and I don't want them for you. All I want is that you should come back to me—nothing else matters." She stood up, and slipped her arm through his. "God knows what I should do without you. I don't!"

"My dearest—how sweet of you to talk like that! It's—well, it's worth going away to hear you say those things." His voice broke, and he tried to regain his control, to hide his emotions by giving a rather stupid little laugh. "You're making me get emotional—this won't do. We're allowing ourselves to get worked up, mother. Not like me."

Claudia threw her arms round him, and drew down his head so that his cheek pressed against hers. "Wilfred, Wilfred," she whispered, "come back—you must come back. I do need you so badly. I love you so dreadfully."

Now she sighed, picked up some letters which the typist had brought in and began to turn them over restlessly. The faint noise of the machinery from the shops reached her, she could hear the whirring of belts like the distant humming of great bees, at intervals she heard the clang of metal on metal, or the rattle of a trolley as it passed along the shop.

Men going every day, men who must be replaced because the output must be kept up—girls who must learn, boys, who ought still to be at school, working at the capstans, food to be obtained for the canteen, endless forms to be filled in for petrol, metal, stores. Now these tribunals—and at the recollection her anger rose and flared again. Let Walsh or Kennedy, or Councillor Maddon, try to dictate to her. Let the Military Representative. She knew him—offensive fellow who had once asked her if it were true that she ordered her men to shoot foxes if they were found on her estate. "What I order my men is my business and not yours, Captain Coxton!"

Still, Henri was safe, Wilfred was safe—"somewhere in France" or Flanders, or Belgium, she never knew where these places were. Stockie had a map and flags—they never conveyed anything to Claudia Bower.

II

Tribunals! She had argued, tried to keep Jackson, who was her best tool-maker, fought for Ruskin, her foreman painter. "Is painting a very necessary type of work, Lady Bower?" That was Maddon, the fat fool.

"I should have thought that girls might have done all the painting that was needed"—Coxton, tugging at his little ragged moustache.

"Would you care to listen to what painting really means, gentlemen?" She had stood there, her head thrown back, her hair catching the one pale shaft of light that stole into the dingy room, still handsome, still ready to fight. "Would you care to

hear particulars of baking and varnishing, of ovens and temperatures? If so Ruskin will tell you, but it will take an hour or so. Believe me, painting metal—is not the same as painting a house, Mr. Maddon. Our paint has *got* to withstand the assaults of air, water and weather."

Maddon had coughed and sputtered, because everyone knew that his painting and paper-hanging were the worst in the whole Riding. She had come back to the works late, after the day shift had gone, and had walked up to the canteen to get a cup of the black, strong tea which always revived her. Walking back down the works she had glanced at the capstans as she passed, because the voice of one of the men there had caught her ear as being unusual: "My dear fellow, at the moment England has one god, Jingoism—and Kipling is his prophet." She paused and another voice answered: "Lord, how true—how ghastly true! Where's the girl with the tea-wagon? I never was so sick of anything as these confounded turnings."

She looked more closely at the two young men, both wore engineer's overalls; both had smooth, dark hair and, somehow, neither of them seemed to be the type to which she was accustomed. She continued her way down the shop and called Evans, the head foreman for the night-shift, to her.

"Who are those la-di-dah fellows on the capstans?" she asked.

"New hands, m'lady. They were sent by the Ministry, I think."

She scowled. "Do you? I don't! Send them to me—the two most exquisite. One of 'em's an authority on Kipling. I want them in my office."

He began to speak, quickly and volubly. "I think that I know the two men you mean—they're on this new scheme—have joined the Association—they're accredited engineers, you'll find. Learners—that iss, they haff not been here ferry long—"

Claudia stared at him coldly. "You're getting a bit flustered, aren't you? Send them to me."

They came and stood before her, in the office where the electric light, cold and hard, lit up their young faces very clearly.

"How long have you been here?" she demanded.

"About three weeks—it is three weeks, isn't it, Harry?"

"What do you get?"

"We're under instruction, Lady Bower——"

"I didn't ask you that—answer my questions, if you please."

"Tuppence ha'penny an hour."

"You can't live on that——"

"Scarcely!" The one called "Harry" laughed.

Her face hardened. This was where the suspension of the Factory Acts was leading them, was it? This was where the withdrawal of restrictions "for the duration" was taking them! Harrison, Ruskin, Jackson—taken, while these two ninnies and others like them were palmed off on to Bower's and said to be "under instruction".

"You've joined the Association, have you—all of you—you collar-and-cuff brigade? Oh, you have. I wonder what you were before August '14? Not planning to be engineers, I'll take my oath. Who took you on—Evans? Then go to Evans and tell him to take you off, and take yourselves off—and the quicker the better! Tribunals—councils to take my decent men away from me, while you young toads, with your 'ha-ha' talk of Kipling and Jingoism, are foisted on to me! Not on your lives—get out and don't let me find you here again. Your father's works"—as one of them tried to interrupt. "Damn your father's works! This is Bower's—not your father's concern. That's enough!"

There was trouble. Trouble with Evans, trouble with Owen, and finally trouble with the committee who had sent the young men to Bower's. It appeared that "tuppence ha'penny" was not their sole wage, they were in receipt of a grant which brought their wages up to fivepence halfpenny an hour, a grant which was paid by the committee. Claudia faced them, Claudia gave facts and figures, quoted times and job numbers; she declared that no one, not all the local governing bodies in creation, should make her take men who were not of her own choosing. "What are these fellows?" she demanded. "Conscientious objectors, who haven't the guts to admit it. Let them go to gaol, let them fight for their principles, as other

men are fighting for theirs, and I—for one—will take my hat off to them. But they don't hide under my benches and behind my machines, for all the tea in China. I'll select my own men in future, or I'll close Bower's down, before I'll have it made a dumping ground for the sons of aldermen and town councillors!"

"Lady Bower Takes Off Her Hat to the Conchies" was the headline in the local paper. Owen read it and smiled sourly, David shook his head and said: "Oh, Claudia, Claudia, don't make yourself unpopular, my dear." Claudia, her eyes sparkling, with that lovely head of hers still held very high, snapped her fingers at the lot of them, and engaged her own men and girls.

She was growing very thin, for Bower's every day in the week, except the two when she rushed up to Town to see how Wilson fared at Coster's, made heavy work, long days for a woman who would soon be fifty. She worried over Wilfred, over Henri, and over Hugh—who refused to talk about the war, who was nervy and irritable, and who showed no signs of either joining the Army or declaring himself a C.O.

Orders for shell-cases pouring in, the papers full of the need for shells. Other papers protesting that it was not lack of shells but lack of management which accounted for the reverses. Wilfred hinted in his letters that munitions were short, and that half the stuff was worthless. "Is it a kind of campaign to treat the enemy kindly?" he asked. "I don't mind that if they can be persuaded to treat us the same! Only their shells usually burst—ours . . . Well, let's leave it at that."

Speed up, speed up. Increase output, increase output! Owen wanted to cut out the tea which came round at half past three each afternoon. David said: "Oh, you'll not gain much that way. At the most it's five minutes."

Claudia agreed. "No, no. Edward always believed that it increased production after they'd had a cup of tea. He proved it—it pays in the end."

"It may do in some cases, but some of them manage to spin out that cup of tea for longer than any five minutes, believe me."

"That's the fault of your foremen, let them keep their eyes open."

September 1916. She had left London at ten, and all the way back sat with her eyes closed, trying to think what ought to be done about Hugh. He had been to America, as secretary to some old fool who went out there to chatter to a lot of other old fools. He was back, and lounging about London, talking vaguely of a "possible job in a Government office".

"Must make you feel out of it—with Wilfred and Henri both out there!" She had hoped to sting him into some kind of action, instead of which he stared at her, his eyes wide, his hands clenched, and said in a high, shaking voice :

"God, let me alone ! Do you think I don't know all that—I tell you, I'm not going. I'm not going ! I can't go !"

She reflected that she ought to have taken him by the shoulders and shaken him, but somehow she hadn't been able to. There was something so real, actual, in his distress ; even his forehead was covered with little beads of sweat. Queer, she'd always loved Hugh, and now—oh, lord, what a mess it all was !

"I'll drive to the works first," she told her chauffeur, and again felt that sense of utter weariness, felt that she didn't really care much what went on at the works, or Coster's—she wanted her own home and rest. As she walked up the wide gravel path before the works, she noticed that another car was waiting, the little runabout that was Wilfred's, and saw that the lad whose work was mainly washing the cars was at the wheel. She called to him :

"Porter, what are you doing here ?"

He leant from the car, touching his cap, "I brought Miss Stocker over, m'lady."

Claudia nodded, thought how like Stockie it was to have come over, to badger her into going back to Marlingly quickly, no doubt. Stockie was like a hen with a chicken lately, bless her.

"You're very quiet here," she said to the sergeant at the door, as she entered. "What's the matter ? Had a breakdown ?"

"No, m'lady, we've got summat we've never 'ad before—a strike."

"Strike ! What the devil d'you mean, sergeant ? What's this—Bower's striking ? Here, let me see what it's all about. I'll have no damned strikes here, choose how ! I'll settle any strikes—by God, I will !"

In the office Stockie waited, rising as she entered, coming forward and saying : "Oh, my dear—you're back!"

Claudia patted her shoulder. "Yes, back again, and this is nice news they have for me. Where's Owen? Where's David? Ring for someone to fetch them both. Striking indeed—they've gone mad! Ring the bell, Stockie, and then order me some tea. I'm parched."

Stockie didn't move, she stood there, shaking, her eyes full of tears.

"What's the matter, my dear? You're not ill? What's the matter?"

"It's—it's this. Oh, Lady Bower, to think that I had to bring you such news—here"—her hands, shaking, held out a telegram. Claudia stared at it, holding her breath.

"My God!" she whispered. "It's—it's not Wilfred?"

Stockie nodded, still offering her the telegram. "Yes—"

"Wounded?" And as she spoke she knew that he wasn't wounded, knew in her heart what the telegram said.

"Dead—when?" At last she took the slip of paper, and slipped down into Edward's old chair, holding it before her eyes. "Regret—yes—he was killed the day before yesterday, when I was talking to Wilson about the difficulty of getting wine imported! Don't cry, Stockie—it's no use crying. He said they hadn't enough shells. I saw young Broom, Hartland's eldest boy, yesterday. He said that the Germans have six to our one! That's what killed Wilfred—and"—she stopped suddenly, her hand closing on the telegram, crumpling it into a ball—"God's mercy, Bower's are on strike! Stockie, ring for Manton, I want to know what it's all about. Ring—again—are they all deaf or—dead? Dead, they're not that! That's left for my lad—to die because there weren't enough shells! Manton—come in, shut that door, what's this damned strike? Go on, I want to hear—"

Manton, the secretary, bit his lips and frowned. "Some bother about the tea-wagon, Lady Bower. Millie was a minute or so late coming down with it. One of the men said that she didn't reach him until the five-minutes whistle was just on blowing. Gilkes and Jones spoke to him, and he—well, I gather that he gave them a bit of sauce. Jones sacked him, and

Gilkes backed him up. Then the rest of the Shop Committee objected, and—well, that's how it started. They downed tools at three forty-seven. It's now twenty past four. They're going to picket to prevent the night-shift coming on."

"Anyone discussing the matter with them?"

"Mr. Owen and Mr. Betterton, m'lady. There's this big job—70694—to go off to the TNT filling factory at Brasingly—that's held up.

"Shells—eh?" He nodded. Claudia swung round and caught Stockie's wrist. "Hear that, Stockie? Shells—waiting to go off to be filled. By the God that made me, I'll show them! Out of my way, Manton—Stockie, come with me!"

Into the big shop, where the belts were still, where the machinery stood silent, and where the men and girls had gathered round someone who was speaking to them, someone who spoke in short, clipped sentences—Owen. Claudia stood for a moment, watching, her face very white and very grim.

"... at war. War-time conditions. Make no mistake, there is machinery which I can put in motion, and which I shall not hesitate to use. I have only to telephone to the Town Hall and, believe me, the results will be more unpleasant than you know. These works are not run for the men, they are run for the management, and the sooner you realize that the better."

The voice ceased, and someone in the crowd laughed, the murmur grew, and David's figure appeared. "They were evidently speaking to the men from a box or some such nonsense," Claudia thought. David's hair was going very grey, he stooped too much, his voice wasn't as firm as it used to be.

"... appeal to that sense of fair play—characteristic of Yorkshiremen." A voice called out: "That b— who sacked Charlie's a Taffy!"

"England is fighting with her back to the wall. It's not a matter of individual rights and wrongs: it's a matter of playing for England, and the Empire."

Again a voice: "Fust or second 'ouse, Mr. Daavid?"

Claudia pushed her way forward, and Stockie heard her saying abruptly, "Let me come there, David. I'll talk to them." Then her tall figure dominated the whole crowd, and she stood there facing them in silence.

It seemed to Stockie that under the stare of those blue eyes the men shuffled uneasily, the silence became intolerable. Still Claudia watched them, still she kept her lips closed. Then—quite suddenly—the storm broke. She spoke to them in their own dialect, the language of the Broad Acres, which she was coming to use more and more. Her hands were clenched, one of them still held the crumpled telegram, her head was thrown back, she looked arrogant, domineering, almost brutal.

"Bower's on strike!" she said. "That's pretty! That's t' kind of news to 'ear when you cum back fra' Lundon, where everyone's talking of the need for shells! What the hell d'you, and gutless rats like you, care fur that? I'll tell you—*nowt*! Some of you've got lads out theer, poor blasted fools that they are ter fight fur scum like you lot! You, Wilcox, your lad's theer, an' yours, Mason, ay, an' your'n, Jack Fetter—so's your'n, Chuck Robinson! They've got guns, they've got men, and they've no shells ter feed t' guns, an' whiles they're standing theer, whiles the Germans are banging away at 'em, slaughterin' 'em wholesale, you—you murderers—damned, bloody murderers—you strike because one of you's not had his *cup of tea*! Get back to your machines, get back to your jobs and, by God, if you're not back in three minutes from now, you can go, and stay out. I'll close the damned plaace while I can get women—yes, get your wives and daughters, your sweethearts if anyone's daft enough to walk out wi' such swine!—to come in and run Bower's! You scum—it's you that I fight the Tribunal for, is it? Not again! You can get taken, be sent to the front, and God in His mercy help England when she has to look to such as you to defend her. Three minutes—back you go! Send your damned Shop Committee to me when you're back. If you're not back by then—then get to hell out of this shop and damn' well stay out. I'm done wi' you, ungrateful to the boys who are fightin' for you, gutless, a crowd of slobbering, doddering old wives who must have their *cup o' tea*, or they whine and grizzle. Now then—Manton, three minutes from now!"

She walked slowly back to her own office, Stockie on her heels, with Owen following. Back again in Edward's chair, she sat stiffly, her hands clenched on the desk before her, her face

a mask, hard, cold and expressionless. Owen stood by the door, his hands in his pockets.

"Sorry that this should have happened, but you see how it was, don't you?"

"I see that I can't turn my back but summat goes wrong," she said.

"Jones tells me that the man—Hayward—was impertinent. One can't allow that, surely, Aunt Claudia?"

"If Jones knew how to handle men, he wouldn't have dared to be. What do we want with Welshmen as foremen here, tell me that? Oh, you're half Welsh, I forgot that. Is that the committee? Let them in. Now, lads, let's 'ear what's ter do."

The little group of workmen entered; one stepped forward and began to speak. "Them was 'ardish words ter swaller, Laady Bower. Ah might tell yer as t' men felt 'em varry mooch; they've allus stood bi' you and your'n."

Claudia nodded. "You can cut that, Thompson. Are they back at work?"

He cocked his head, listening, and dimly the whirr of the belts, the hum of machinery, the clang of metal reached them. "Ay, they're back."

"All right for the night-shift coming in?"

"That's all reit, missus."

"Then tell the men that I shall meet the Shop Committee tomorrow at lunch-time. I'll discuss the matter of Hayward, and we will—together, that is, with your help—arrange something about this damned tea-wagon. And"—her fingers were busy smoothing out a piece of flimsy paper on the table—"have this posted on the board, please, Thompson." She picked up the telegram and handed it to him.

He took it and read it, his mouth open—his face changed colour under its grime and dirt. "God God! Mister Wilfred!" Then, making a sudden move towards her, he cried: "Naay—if we'd 'a' known, my lass—we'd niver 'ave 'ad—you oughter 'ave told us—reit at t' start."

"No, Ah'd never do that," Claudia said. "My poor lad's no more reason—dead or alive—for your working than your own bairns are. We must work fur 'em all, Thompson—not only fur mine or yours, but for every one on 'em."

CHAPTER TWO

I

A WEEK later Owen went. He maintained his air of slight superiority, even appeared to feel some contempt for himself because he was leaving Bower's. At their last interview, when Claudia wished him good-bye, he stood before her, smiling a little scornfully, and said: "You'll like Bower's better without me, Aunt Claudia. You and I have never got on, have we?"

"Maybe we look at life differently," she said. "It's nothing more than that. You see it one way, I see it another."

"Don't pander to your men," he advised. "They'll ride rough-shod over you if you do."

She shook her head. "Nay, that's where you're wrong. I don't pander to 'em, never have and never shall. I don't believe in using nothing but spurs and the curb though, Owen.

"Not much use in going on with it all," Claudia said to Stockie. "With Wilfred gone, what's the good of his dairy farm, and his pedigree birds? I might as well let them go. My God, Stockie, it can't be possible that he's gone. Wilfred—what had he to do with the war? He didn't really care whether Germans or Englishmen bought his eggs. All he cared about was clean milk, good cattle, efficient production. How have we all come to be dragged into this ghastly business?"

Then, one evening, Hugh came to Marlingly. White-faced, wide-eyed, and with hands that shook. Claudia stared at him, her face hard.

"Still nicely dressed—still wearing silk shirts. I wonder that you dare come here now you know that Wilf's dead, and knowing how and why he died."

"You'd like me to either be out there, in that filth and awfulness, or in gaol, wouldn't you?" he asked, his mouth trembling.

"Whichever you did," Claudia said, "I'd at least be able to respect you."

"W-why?" He was stammering. "W-why would you like either of th-those things b-better?"

"You'd be at least defending your principles."

"But"—he flung his hands wide—"I have no principles. I don't hate the Germans, I don't hate anyone. I don't think I should be any good! I should be frightened, no use to anyone."

"Frightened!" She flung back her head, angry and intolerant. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Don't you see that it's something I can't help?" Hugh said earnestly. "I don't want to be afraid—it's just s-something that's beyond me. You don't know w-what fear is, do you?"

"If I did, I wouldn't admit it. D'you suppose Wilfred wanted to go out there, and"—she paused—"stay there?"

"No, I don't. Th-that doesn't make it easier for me. I shouldn't mind being shot—it's the other things that terrify me. Watching, hearing, smelling, listening—oh, God!" He covered his face with his hands, then, after a shivering moment, raised his eyes and met hers. "Just the same," he said, "I am going." His tone was suddenly defiant. "I went to the recruiting office at Marbury this morning as I came through. Now you can take back what you said—no, you shan't, go on, say that I'm a coward. It's true, I can't help it, and I don't care! You shan't think that I'm hiding behind Wilf, and Henri and Owen! I'm not! I'd go to prison only I can't honestly say that I don't believe in war—I—I d-don't know whether it's right or w-wrong. Anyway, it doesn't matter a damn—perhaps I'll be shot quickly—and get it over."

She rose and came over to him, laying her hand on his shoulder, her anger gone; all her heart softened towards this frightened lad, who had always been more sensitive than Wilf and Owen. She wondered if he were right. If it would all be too much for him. Dimly she thought: 'They shoot men who

run away. Suppose Hugh couldn't help it, suppose he turned tail and ran, suppose he was standing against a wall facing a firing-party—it's dreadful.'

"Stop shaking, Hugh," she said. "It's not so bad, perhaps, as you think. It might be over any day now. Brace up and be a man, my dear. You're doing what's right, and that ought to help you."

He looked at her, a faint smile touching the corners of his mouth, that mouth which she had always said was too pretty for a boy. "Lucky you are, Claudia, dear. All your nice little shibboleths to help you. Do they really help you? Did they help you when Wilf was killed, I wonder?"

"Don't," she said—"don't, Hugh, that's not fair."

That night she went into his room. He ought to have been in bed, she thought. He wasn't; he was staring out of the window into the dark.

"Time that you were in bed, Hugh."

"Me?" he said. "Not tonight. Claudia, come here. Look, you can see the outline of the trees, you can see that silly one called a 'monkey puzzle', that Uncle Edward had planted just for fun, because it amused him. Look, you can see the outline of the stables, there. Listen, there's Vanity's grand-daughter's son telling the world what he thinks of it. There's old Romulus tramping about in his stall—the old ruffian." He laughed. "If only I could believe that I was going to fight for Marlingly, fight to prevent some German from stamping over these lawns, from cutting down those elms and making the whole place look horrible—I'd go, 'as joyous and as jocund as to jest'." He paused and sighed. "But then I'd do that to prevent Mr. Bung the Brewer from doing the same thing! Oh, what's the use of talking? Whether you think this or think that doesn't matter a damn. If only I could be single-minded. Wilf was single-minded—so are you, Claudia. You are the lucky people. It's fools like me who see this, and realize that, and remember that if an English girl cries when her sweetheart is killed, it's possible that a German girl does just the same for hers. 'Some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England'—what does it matter if it's English, German or Hottentot? There, go to bed, dear, I'm only annoying you,

and God forbid that I should muddle you as I've contrived to muddle myself."

"But listen, Hugh"—her voice still remained gentle, persuasive. Hugh, looking at her pale face, with its crown of bright hair, meeting those steady eyes, smiled because his aunt Claudia still remained so very lovely, and Hugh Flueellyn had always allowed beauty to mean more to him than anything else in his small world.

"I'm listening, my dear—go on."

"It's not right, it's not supportable that Henri, Wilf, young Broom, the men at the works, should all go and you stay here—safe and happy."

"Happy!" He laughed shrilly. "You don't really think that I've been enjoying myself, do you? And I still don't see why any of them need have gone. I don't even know that they had the slightest right to go, or to be asked to go. What they do, did, doesn't really affect me. I can't explain, it's beyond me, only I don't want you to think that I'm going now because I have a noble impulse to avenge poor Wilfred or something of that kind. I'm going because I realize that if I don't go I shall be made to go. I've found several more or less agreeable funk holes—well, I begin to doubt that they're really safe or even possible any longer. So I'm going to join up."

Almost impatiently, she said: "Oh, have done, Hugh. Why must you make yourself out such a louse? It's not true. Perhaps you have been—well, let's face it—inclined to dodge your duty, but you've come to your senses and—"

"And there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repenteth, eh? No, I won't subscribe to that, because it's not true. Good night, my dear—one day, when we're sane again, can I come back to Marlingly and make that herbaceous border, and keep the little box hedges nicely trimmed for you?"

II

Owen survived barely three weeks in France and Claudia, hearing of his death, tortured herself with the thought that possibly she had been unjust to him. Robert, looking so much older that her heart ached, showed her with pride a letter from

his colonel, and said, his whole face twitching as he spoke, that it was a comfort to him.

"Really, Robbie? It really comforts you, that letter?"

He folded it carefully and put it away in his note-case. "Indeed it does. Didn't you find such letters a comfort when—when you lost Wilfred?"

"No," Claudia said harshly, "not the slightest comfort!"

Robert said, "I've tried to join up myself—don't think that I've shirked it, Claudie. They wouldn't take me—my heart's not too good. But I did try—several times." His face lost its look of tired middle age, she saw it again as her young brother's, so handsome, and—she could admit it now—just a little stupid and unreliable. She could imagine how he had walked into various recruiting offices and offered himself, been refused, and experienced just a faint sense of relief because his heart was "not too good". He was going back to America next week, to live in a huge apartment, eating American food, imbibing American ideas. She might never see him again.

"Poor Robbie," she said. "Don't worry about it. I should think that they can manage without taking men of forty-seven. You deserve a rest."

"Perhaps." His equanimity was returning. "Yet—sometimes, I wish that I was back in Bower's, y'know. I wasn't made to just drift about. I don't believe that we Yorkshire folk transplant very well, d'you?"

"Maybe not, we're rooted too deeply."

"I'd like to have seen Hugh again before I went," he said. "Queer lad, Hugh, but—thank God—he's joined up. He'd have felt badly—now this awful thing has happened—when he remembered that poor Owen went and he stayed at home. After all"—he squared his shoulders—"we've not done too badly for the country—your son, my two, Henri, and there's young Bobbie aching to go. Not too bad a record, eh?"

Claudia laughed, her eyes cold. "No, we've been pretty good at giving . . . we old ones."

More and more she talked to David; he almost lived at Marlingly, and it was pleasant to hear his low, rather hesitating voice, see his tall figure pacing along the garden paths, his hands clasped behind his back. David never worried her, he never

talked of the glory of giving boys to be blown to pieces, never "killed Germans with his mouth" or declared that he longed to see them exterminated. He seemed to care less and less for the works, drifted down to the dairies more and more, and produced all kinds of small improvements for churning, making pats of butter—even invented a new kind of egg-box.

"David's a very elderly gentleman," Claudia told Stockie. "A very delightful elderly gentleman, too. In some queer way he makes me feel—when he talks about him—that Wilfred isn't dead, blown to bits—makes me feel that he might come back any day and want to find the dairies running as he left them. Oh, I'm very grateful for David."

Stockie, delighted that her beloved Claudia should find someone to make life happier, smiled and nodded approval. "Yes, indeed, I always think that Mr. David is like an elder brother to you."

Claudia nodded. "Yes—just that—an elder brother."

Still, even with David, life was a difficult business, a tiring, heavy business. She had ploughed up grassland, planted potatoes wherever possible. Kennedy had suggested that she might plough up the Marlingly lawns. "Really, every square yard is valuable, Lady Bower."

She glanced at the green, even turf, remembered that Hugh loved them, and shook her head.

"No—anything else, but I can't touch them. My nephew went to France to fight for those lawns, you see."

He stared at her, and she thought: 'He thinks that I'm cracked—well, who cares if he does? I won't cut them up!'

In November 1917, Fernanda telegraphed: *Henri killed, come to me.*

Claudia was at Bower's when the telegram came, tired and almost worn out. There had been air raids for the past two nights, during the night-shift. A couple of women had been hysterical, and the infection of screaming had spread. Half the drillers had been yelling their heads off. Claudia had slept at the works, in a little room off the main office. She had stormed and bullied, threatened dismissal, and finally calmed the women. But the morning had found her tired and unrefreshed

after only four hours' sleep, heavy-eyed and nervous. David and she sat in the office, with two of the foremen, debating over a fresh order, when the telegram came. Claudia pushed back the cup of tea which stood—as almost invariably—at her elbow, and said in a voice which sounded peevish :

"Settle it without me. Act as you think best. I must go to London to my daughter, her husband's been killed. Manton, tell Potter to bring the car round quickly. What train can I catch ?"

In the train, being rushed southwards, she passed her hand over her aching eyes, and thought : 'I'm just about at the far end. God knows what I shall be able to say to her, my poor baby.'

'Nanda was distraught, she never ceased walking up and down, assuring everyone that the news wasn't true. It was : "Telephone to the War Office. Make inquiries. Get on to George Parkington—he could tell me. Of course it's not true. Mummy, what devils they are to torture one like this ! It's carelessness—some name like Pinto, not Pinto at all. I had a letter only this morning. How can Henri be killed ?" Then all that was succeeded by the hopeless conviction that it was not a mistake, that it was true, and that Henri would be left somewhere in France. Fernanda, lovely, spoilt, changed from someone who was unreasonable to a mad woman, who sobbed and screamed, who became frenzied and half frantic with grief. Claudia tried to soothe her, took her in her arms and rocked her gently as she might have tried to quieten a baby, and lastly sent for a doctor, who gave her something to induce sleep and ensure her a few hours' forgetfulness.

Claudia took them up to Marlingly and installed them there, hoping that the quiet and peace of the old house might restore Fernanda. Fernanda filled the whole of her horizon, she lived for her, planned everything for her comfort, her diversion, her pleasure. Fernanda was interested in nothing—even Jane and Bobbie had ceased to interest her. Claudia watched their small, intent faces, and resented the fact that their mother's grief should throw so dark a shadow over their lives. Nice little things, attractive, even fascinating for all their sophistication, and devoted to their mother, who seemed to spend her life either snatching them to her and kissing them wildly, or telling

them to be quiet and run away so that they should not disturb her.

"Wilfred, Owen, and now Henri." Fernanda repeated the ghastly litany again and again, until Claudia could have screamed. "Only wait, and we shall hear that Hugh's gone, too—we shall all be wiped out—even Bobbie, because in another year or two he'll go."

"Be quiet, 'Nanda!" Claudia ordered sharply. "What kind of talk is that for the poor bairns to hear?" Then she caught her breath sharply. All wiped out! She hadn't beaten old Blenkiron after all! The thing still operated for all her scheming and cleverness, she had helped Robbie to change his name—that hadn't helped, they were caught, as the old man had said they should be—wiped out! Bowers, Pintos and the Flueellyns, who were really Marsdens. Did that mean that even Hugh and this bright-faced little Bobbie would be caught, and wiped out? She shivered. After all, with all her cleverness, all her determination, Claudia Bower hadn't accomplished much after all.

Bobbie said: "Mummy dar-ling, there's lots of time, we may have crumpled them by that time. Lots of the chaps at school think we shall. I wouldn't worry."

Claudia used to watch the two children, Bobbie so terribly grown up and Jane so certain of herself, never hesitating as to what they were going to do with their lives—the one dancing mad, the other expressing opinions regarding films which appeared to Claudia to be unbelievably technical.

"Dancing!" she said. "You don't mean that you want to be a professional dancer, do you? That's no trade for a man, surely?"

"I don't want to be just an amateur," he said. "Though," with an air of explaining to a younger and less well-informed person than himself, "the amateurs today are better than the pros. of ten years ago, I'm told. The standard's frightfully high! It's a marvellous business if you can get your foot in—and keep it in. I'm not trying to make puns, gran."

Jane scoffed at his ideas. "A dancer! Why, what do people know of you, even if you're tip-top? You're crazy, Bobbie. The films are the thing. Think of being an Alice Terry,

or—Pauline Frederick or Nazimova or Theda Bara. That's something like an ambition!"

Not even a real actress, Claudia thought, just one of these picture people, who never seem quite real. What had Fernanda been thinking of? They were both so grown-up, well behaved, well mannered, quite charming, but it seemed to her that they talked to her as if she were their junior by years. They offered to do an entertainment at the works at Christmas.

"Love to, gran, if it would amuse your people," Bobbie said.

"You couldn't do it," Claudia said. "Why, there'd be nearly six hundred men and girls there. Wouldn't you be nervous?"

Nervous! They laughed at the idea, set to work and wrote plays which they called "sketches", went down to the works and showed the carpenter just what they wanted for a stage, arranged about curtains, lights, and never asked her advice. She even felt a little thrilled and excited at the idea of these two babies, her grandchildren, managing to give an entertainment to Bower's.

"Mind," she said, "you must practise. I won't have you make a poppy-show of either yourselves or me."

They both smiled and assured her that they'd "rehearse—not practise—until the cows came home".

She sat in the front row, with Fernanda—looking very beautiful in her black clothes—with David, and Stockie, and then, behind them, the office staff, the foremen, the heads of departments; further back the workmen and their wives, the work girls and their sweethearts—those who still possessed such a thing, and weren't waiting for some man to come back from the front.

When Bobbie danced on, Fernanda caught her hand, and whispered: "Oh, my God, isn't he like Henri?" Claudia couldn't see it. Bobbie had ten times as much assurance, as much energy, as much charm, as Henri had ever had. And Jane—at the sight of her the works applauded so that Claudia had to turn round and laughingly shake her head at them. Jane was lovely—it never occurred to Claudia that Jane was a replica of what Claudia Marsden had been—audacious, lovely, vivid.

Stockie said: "They're marvellous! I never imagined . . ."

David turned to Claudia, and whispered: "You've got a couple of wonderful grandchildren, Claudie!"

And Bobbie and Jane went on with their singing, dancing and their funny little "sketches", which were so grown-up and sophisticated, as if it was all quite simple, and there was no need to make a fuss about either of them.

When they went back to school, Claudia missed them, found herself thinking about them a good deal and wondering if they would really do all they said. She watched Fernanda closely, noting each awakening interest, delighting in every fresh demonstration of returning vitality. Not that she wanted 'Nanda to forget Henri—she had been far too fond of him herself for that—but at thirty-three, you didn't want to see a woman as beautiful as 'Nanda lose grip on everything. In January, when she went up to Coster's, 'Nanda came with her, and they stayed in Town for nearly a week, returning to Marlingly together. Claudia was content to be back, Bower's was running smoothly, Coster's was not doing so badly taking everything into consideration, and there was a letter from Hugh waiting for her. Not that Hugh's letters ever told her much, they were short, repressed scrawls, but they gave her the only news for which she craved—that Hugh, at least, was safe.

"Hugh's all right," she said at dinner that night.

"Hugh would be," 'Nanda said bitterly. "Having dodged the war for two years while other men faced it! Little cad!"

"No, no!" Claudia objected. "I can't have you say that. Hugh admitted everything to me—and he went, in spite of his fears. Be just, 'Nanda."

"Because he knew that if he didn't go, they'd come and fetch him."

"Well, admit at least that he didn't wait for that—and, after all, every day counts."

"Perhaps. I shouldn't have said that, mother, for honestly I can't say that Hugh interests me much." Then, after a pause, "I think that I shall go back to London, darling. I begin to feel that I can face things again. I won't go to Portland Square, I think. I shall have a flat somewhere."

She went; chose a modern flat, very ugly and entirely

lacking in individuality, Claudia thought. Portland Square stood empty, looking rather forlorn and neglected. No men-servants, Mrs. Haversham growing old and cantankerous, maids difficult to get. David listened to Claudia's tirade about the uselessness of the old house, and said abruptly: "Sell it."

"Sell Portland Square!"

"Why not? 'Nanda doesn't want to live there, you don't—Bobbie and Jane never will—Hugh won't. What's the use of keeping it?"

Claudia sat with her chin propped on her hand. "Sell it," she said slowly. "I don't know. If I did"—she spoke very slowly—"I think I'd sell Coster's as well. I'm getting too old for it, Davy. Too old to spend my days rushing up and down to Town, trying to get stuff through, bothering about sherries and ports and champagne."

"You might be wise," David agreed. "It's a big responsibility."

That night she lay awake, thinking it over. Sell Portland Square, sell Coster's—sever the last ties which could remind her of old father Ferdinand, and Francis, and—she felt her thoughts check suddenly as if they shied away from something which startled them—her youth. Those places, those people, belonged to her youth, when she had possessed almost inexhaustible vitality, when she had wanted to know and understand, manage and arrange. Now—she wanted Marlingly, her gardens, the country, David, her kind little Stockie, and—and Hugh. The more she thought of it, the easier the thought of parting with Coster's, with the big house in Portland Square, became. After all, what did it matter? She never wanted to see London again, even Coster's had in some way ceased to be the production of her own brain and energy. Wilson was efficient, and most of the men she had known in the old days had either died or retired. The new employees, decent, civil fellows, had no personal interest for her. Anyway, she was tired, sick to death of working and managing, ordering and buying and selling.

"You may be right," she said to David. "Perhaps I should be wise to let the London affairs go. Business isn't what it used to be—oh, there's money in it, but the spirit's different.

The old intimate feeling's gone. Men work for you, but they'd as soon work for anyone else who paid 'em the same wage. I feel the same: it doesn't much matter to me if it's Tom, Dick or Harry who bottles the Italian stuff, so long as it's done properly. There is only one thing I want from Coster's—the picture of 'The Widow'."

David smiled. "I can understand that, she belongs to what's past and over. And yet, Claudio, I don't doubt that she'd have found you a very modern product; she'd have frowned at your methods, and complained that you had no passionate and overpowering interest in the business. We're all modern, and cold and calculating, hard and a little inhuman to the generation that's ahead of us, I fancy."

She shrugged her shoulders. "In that case it's better for us to stand back and let the new generation install their new methods ; at least by retiring one saves energy, and prevents oneself kicking against what these people are pleased to call progress, new methods, and all the rest of it. You're right, Davy, Coster's shall go, and Portland Square can follow it."

Almost as abruptly as it had begun, the war ended and England was at peace again, except for a crowd of old men who sat and talked and argued in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, and seemed unlikely to come to any satisfactory conclusion. Hugh did not come home, he was sent to Cologne and wrote that he didn't mind a great deal.

I shall, at least [he wrote], have enlarged my knowledge of Europe, and satisfied myself if these people—whom we have been assured are monsters—are as frightful in their own homes as they have been reputed to be.

Coster's was on the market, so was Portland Square. Claudio discussed it with Fernanda, who had grown lovelier than ever, whose hair was like brightly burnished gold, and whose clothes were more elaborate than before. At first, Claudio, watching her, thought : 'She's forgotten Henri—put it all behind her.' Then, later, when she saw the new lines round

'Nanda's mouth, realized how hard those blue eyes had grown, she revised her opinion.

'She doesn't want to remember—but she can't help herself, and it still hurts her.'

"The children won't be interested in Coster's or in the house," 'Nanda said. "They've both chosen their careers. Bobbie has actually got a part, mostly dancing, in Gallon's new production at the 'Colonial'; and Jane's played a couple of small parts in two of these English films they're so excited about. She wants to go out to Hollywood—" she laughed—"which means that Jane will certainly go, if I know my daughter."

"And you?" Claudia said. "What are you going to do, 'Nanda?"

'Nanda looked at her, looked queerly, Claudia thought, with her eyes narrowed, and her lips twisted a little. "Me? Oh, I'm going to be married, darling. Quite soon."

"You?" Claudia said. "You, 'Nanda?" It didn't seem possible.

'Nanda smiled. "Don't be so surprised, angel. I'm still young enough to want a home and—a man, aren't I?"

"Yes, oh yes—who is it?"

"You don't know him," 'Nanda said. "He's a Russian—a White Russian. Once a Cossack officer. His name's Alexander Verschoff. He is young, very handsome, and lost everything in the wretched revolution."

Claudia stared at her, distressed and unbelieving. A Russian—somehow, she'd never thought of them as suitable husbands for Englishwomen. Somewhere, deep in her heart, something revolted at the thought. "'Nanda dear, a Cossack! You're half a Jew, do you know that?"

"My dearest!" This time Fernanda laughed naturally. "Don't be so silly. What has that to do with Alex and me? Oh, believe me, he's a charming person, and incidentally I shall be a Countess—Countess Fernanda Verschoff. I think it sounds rather nice, don't you?"

"I don't know—I've never set much store by titles. One thing you haven't said—do you love him? Does he love you?"

"Alex—he says, and says quite beautifully, that he adores me."

"But you," Claudia persisted—"that's what I want to know."

'Nanda stood before a long mirror and smoothed her bright hair, then twisted so that she could see the hang of her skirt. Only after a long pause did she reply, abruptly, almost as if she had been startled out of her own thoughts.

"Me—love Alex?—why of course, darling, haven't I made that clear?"

CHAPTER THREE

I

CLAUDIA pushed away the papers and leaned back in her chair.

"There, Davy, that's the end of my career—such as it's been. Coster's sold, Portland Square sold—they're going to make it into modern flats—and now Bower's. Well, I'm not sorry—I'm too old to bother about such things any longer. They'd lost everything that interested me in them—they had become just machines that made, or lost, money. We'll keep the dairies going"—she paused—"because Wilf was proud of them, and they—well, they kind of 'belong'. I haven't felt these last years that either Bower's or Coster's—belonged to me."

David gathered the papers together and laid them in a neat pile on her desk, then turned and smiled at her.

"You've always liked things and people to be—yours, haven't you, my dear? At nineteen you were holding the reins, pulling strings, managing a huge house, an old man, a baby and young Robert! Oh, you're a wonderful woman! Then later it was Edward and me, and Bower's as well as Coster's. And, mind you, you did it all well."

She picked up a cigarette, and held it towards him for a light.

"Thanks, Davy." Then, thoughtfully, "Was I too possessive, d'you think?"

"Not more than anyone with the same amount of will and energy would have been, I fancy. You see, you were always quicker, more energetic, more vivid, with more driving-power than the rest of us, and—you knew it. Only one can't keep it up for ever, Claudie. Young people come into the field, equipped with new ideas, new methods, beliefs, and—then the clash comes. That was why you and poor young Owen never rubbed along quite easily. Did it never strike you that he was far more like you than either Wilfred, Robert or Hugh? Oh yes—the same energy, only his was yours modernized, possibly less

human, less personal. Wilfred wanted to do his job, take his time doing it, and lacked any desire to be spectacular. Hugh—well, I doubt if Hugh has ever had much real ambition beyond the garden, and Marlingly—and possibly to please you. Owen wanted—what he thought was success. If he'd come back, poor chap, he'd have run Bower's—in his own modern, rather mechanical fashion—wonderfully well. He'd never have cared to know the names of his men, where they lived or anything about them, but his output would have been remarkable."

"Well"—she pointed to the little stack of documents—"that's the end of it, and I'm not sorry. Queer how we've disintegrated, as it were, Davy. Robert in New York, Jane just married to a man called Paul H. Francis, who Bobbie tells me is 'a spot man, a genius one might say, at stunts'. Bobbie rehearsing in Town, his name outside the 'Majestic' in electric lights—'Bobbie Pinto'! And 'Nanda—my lovely 'Nanda"—she sighed—"wandering about from Rome to Monte Carlo, Paris to Berlin, Vienna to Brussels, with her Russian. I shouldn't mind her spending money as she does, if I felt that she got anything for it. Damn it, they haven't even a home!"

David moved impatiently. "A home! Perhaps it's as well. A home with that man would be insupportable. I shall never know where these people get the reputation for charm and distinction, fascination and brains, from. They're a dull lot. There's such a sameness about these White Russians once they come to Europe and adopt the role of exile. I have yet to meet one, hear of one, whose father didn't either command the Cossacks or the Imperial Guard. Their mothers were always either ladies-in-waiting, or intimate friends of the Empress. They always had a Grand Duke—either Paul or Nicholas—for a godfather, and were given ikons of fabulous value as christening presents. Fernanda's husband is no exception."

Claudia rubbed out the end of her cigarette, then rose. "Oh, don't let's talk about it—about Fernanda—it makes me miserable, furiously angry. Her life's just degenerating into a gallop round Europe, and nothing else. It's leading nowhere, she's got nothing out of life—"

"She had a good deal once," he said gently.

"What's the use of that?" Claudia demanded.

"No one, not even the objectionable Russian, can take from her what she has had."

"Surely, that must make the present all the more unbearable!"

"I don't think so," he said softly. "No, I don't really think so, particularly as one grows older. There, I'm going into Marbury, shall I take these papers in with me?"

"Yes, if you will. Shall we see you tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Indeed, you will. I shall bring with me my latest and most epoch-making invention—a new cap for milk-bottles! Good-bye, my dear, don't worry over Fernanda or Jane or Bobbie—believe me, they're all right."

She followed him out into the hall, helped him on with his long, light coat, and watched him climb into the car and drive away. She thought, as she thought so often :

'Dear Davy—what should I do without him?' Then, 'He's almost all I have left.'

Her mind went back to Hugh, and as she thought of him her face softened. A queer fellow, and yet lovable—very lovable. He had come back from Cologne, terribly thin, his face inclined to twitch, his hands not quite steady. His tongue had been bitter, and it had seemed impossible for him to talk of anything without a sneer or a jibe. The war had been "those glorious years of glamour and gallantry", the men had been referred to as "poor bloody fools" or "our glorious heroes". He had read of the Treaty of Versailles, thrown back his head and shouted with laughter that was raucous. "Clemenceau says that Wilson talks like Jesus Christ—no wonder none of them can make top or tail of what he's getting at! Christianity is something of which they're all entirely ignorant. Not going to sell Bower's, are you?" he asked with a face of bland innocence, only the nerve at the corner of his mouth quivering, making him look as if he smiled in spasms. "Oh, don't sell it. Keep it ready to make poison gas in the next war."

For weeks he had done nothing, except lie in bed late, and sit up reading and smoking until the early hours of the morning. A door banging, the sudden hooting of a motor-horn, had made him start and clench his hands. Once or twice he had screamed

in the night and Claudia, going into his room, had found that he was asleep, dreaming.

Then, very slowly, it was as if he had emerged from the darkness, had broken through the clouds that hung round him, and had begun to take an interest in things again. The garden—he had pottered about, talking to old MacIvor, listening to long dissertations on bulbs and borders, on the destruction of plantains, and the cutting back of rose trees.

“Dear Hugh, it must be so dull for him, spending all those hours with MacIvor,” Stockie said.

“Leave Hugh alone,” Claudie advised. “MacIvor’s doing him far more good than all the doctor’s medicines will. Hugh’s on the mend, my dear.”

Then one evening, as they sat at dinner where Claudia still liked to preserve some elegance, where flowers were still used in profusion, and Stockie planned the menu with taste and discretion, Hugh began to talk. Coffee had been served, because Claudia detested leaving the table to drink it in the drawing-room. Liqueurs were handed round—she waved the fat, bulging bottles away and said, as she said almost every evening of her life: “Not for me! Where’s the brandy? And a goblet——”

Hugh hesitated between Grand Marnier and Green Chartreuse. She looked up, her hands held round the goblet, warming it to bring out the full bouquet of the fine spirit.

“Have brandy, Hugh—better for you. It’s ’72——”

He shook his head. “You know what old Samuel Johnson said. He said that brandy was a drink for those who aspire to be heroes. Obviously it’s not for me. No—Chartreuse. As Jane would say: ‘There’s something awfully wicked about the green of Chartreuse.’ Now”—as the door closed behind Peterson—“I dare to talk. Peterson is so exactly like a sergeant-major we had—in the dear old regiment, the brightest ornament of which was Private Hugh Fluellyn—that he makes me windy. Claudia, may I learn to be a farmer’s boy, please?”

“What d’you mean?” His talk about the sergeant-major and the regiment had annoyed her, and now she fancied that he was making fun of her.

“Just that,” and the sneer had gone from his voice, he faced

her, his arms folded on the table, looking for the first time as he used to look, years ago—young, and very eager. “I’d like to make a start down at the dairies, if you’ll let me.”

“It isn’t all watching the butter being made into pats,” Claudia said. “It’s getting up early, walking through clay, coming home with clarty boots, cold and wet. It’s not all beer and skittles remember, choose how.”

She started, because it came to her that she had said all this so long ago, to Wilfred.

“Well—getting up early, clarty boots, clay, rain and all the rest of it,” Hugh said—“I served my apprenticeship for all that.” For the first time, Claudia thought, he referred to the war years without a sneer.

She stretched out her hand across the table, and took his.

“Right,” she said. “Start tomorrow, Hugh. I shall be very happy.”

Stockie chirruped: “Oh, that will be nice! Isn’t that splendid, Lady Bower?”

He’d done it too, stuck to it, worked hard—almost too hard, Claudia thought sometimes—and he was better. Old MacIvor had noticed it, and commented on it. “Ay, Mister Hugh is a changed man, m’leddy. Naething so healin’ tae the nairves as land. There’s a healin’ quality aboot the land which pairmeates the whale system—mental and pheesical.”

There had been relapses, certainly, when Hugh had come home from the farm, from the dairy, or the fowl runs, and gone straight to his room, refusing dinner, only asking to be left alone. But those attacks of nerves had grown less and less frequent, and Claudia began to think of Hugh as “himself again”.

II

Under the trees on the lawns which Hugh regarded as the most lovely part of Marlingly, Claudia sat waiting for him. She sat upright, a cigarette in her fingers, her bright-blue eyes resting with intense pleasure on the garden which spread out before her. Her hair, still bright and cut short, lay in deep waves round her small head, that head which was still carried

with such an arrogant tilt. At over fifty, Claudia Bower was still a beautiful woman, with a complexion that not all the strong tea she habitually drank could spoil. Through the little white gate at the lower end of the lawn, she saw Hugh enter and come towards her. He waved his hand, and shouted something which she could not catch. He walked easily, swinging along, giving one the feeling that he had plenty of reserve of strength and energy. His fair hair shone in the sunshine, and his eyes, like Claudia's, kept turning this way and that, savouring the full beauty of the garden in the afternoon sun. Once he stopped and pulled up some weed, turning to fling it out of the garden into the meadow beyond.

Claudia called : "Come along, don't wait to weed the garden, Hugh. Tea's here."

He reached her and threw himself down on the grass. "Whew ! It's hot."

"Milk or lemon ?"

"Lemon, angel."

She gave him the cup. "It's a heathenish habit. Tea was made to have milk in it, not lemon."

Hugh grinned. "Another of your little cherished shibboleths, eh ?"

"Your herbaceous border looks well, doesn't it ?"

He nodded. "I've got it right this year—old Mac and I between us. D'you know, I used to dream of that border when I was in France, used to try and arrange it in my mind. It almost frightened me when I found how the colours were fading in my memory, and how difficult it was growing to visualize it. Well, it was worth it, perhaps, to be frightened to death for the sake of coming back to help to make that !"

"Were you really—frightened ?" Claudia said softly.

He threw back his head. "Frightened ! My hat ! I used to sweat with sheer terror. Oh, don't let's talk about it: . . . Have you ever been frightened ? I mean really so frightened that you couldn't even be sick with fear ?"

"Frightened ?" Claudia repeated. "Yes—once." And suddenly she was telling Hugh about old Blenkiron cursing her father, telling him everything except such facts as concerned David—David she never mentioned. Told him how she had

feared for Robert, for 'Nanda, for all of them—and how Blenkiron had won in the end.

He listened, his hands clasped round his knees until she ended the story, then he drew a long breath and said: "My poor sweet—and did that really frighten you? Did you really believe it?"

"Look how it's worked out!" she said. "Who's left?"

"Quite a few of us," he replied. "'Nanda, Bobbie, Jane, my father, you and me."

"Yes—but scattered, taken away from their own country, their own sphere. Wilf dead, Owen, Henri."

"That's got nothing to do with your old local preacher and his curse, Claudia. My dear, be reasonable—listen. Do you believe in a God . . .?"

"Well, yes"—she hesitated—"in the rather nebulous way most of us do—yes, I do believe that there is a God, Hugh."

"And science—you believe in that—evolution, and all the rest of it?"

"Yes—I suppose so."

"Then can you believe that God—whoever, whatever He is—is going to allow some hurt, angry old man to take the fate of a whole family into his hands and twist and turn it, exterminate it as he wishes? On the other hand, do you think, either, that this same old man can turn the wheels of life, evolution, destiny as he will in a back lane in the West Riding of Yorkshire? The war—that wiped out Wilf and Owen and Henri—well, your father had as much of a hand in making that possible as this old—what's his name?—Blenkiron. Everyone had a hand in that war—had a hand in allowing it to be made—even you, Claudia dear, even Uncle Edward and David. No one is quite guiltless except the young people like Jane and Bobbie. Scattered—that's done of their own free will. Jane and Bobbie don't want to tread the same paths—and why should they? They want to walk along new ways, and they realize that they may be unknown but, at least, they can't lead to worse disaster than the old ones did. My father was works manager at Bower's—am I any worse trying to be a decent dairy farmer? Bobbie's father bought and sold wine, Bobbie sells his singing, his dancing—it's only another saleable commodity."

"Then," she said slowly, "you don't think that it matters—to be forgotten?"

"No, I don't think so. Once I'm dead why should I bother as to whether people remember me or not? It concerns me more whether I shall be able to remember them—anything."

Claudia sighed. "It seems—a rather miserable business," she said.

"Darling, to forget and to be forgotten—why? All through our lives we are trying to forget, trying almost desperately. We only want to remember pleasant things, and usually they're tangled up horribly in the things that were quite damnable. What was your father's name, Claudia?"

"Thomas Marsden," she said.

"Thomas Marsden," Hugh repeated. "There, now I know what his name was am I one bit better off, or is he one bit more remembered? If I went to the churchyard and looked about for a grave with his name on it, should I be remembering him any more than I am now? Oh, Claudia, my dear, it's all so illogical. And what satisfaction can it be to any of us to know—if indeed we know anything after we're dead—that old William's son, and Annie's daughter, remember us? It's this queer fear of admitting the possibility of extinction that we all jib at. That's why we're always gathering more and more goods and chattels round us, in the belief that it will make us—permanent." He stared back at the old house, his eyes puckered a little. "Nothing is permanent, not even that house; bits of brick, stone, mortar are shaling off all the time, new windows being put in, repairs—how much of the old building, as it was when it was built, is really left, d'you think? The things that are lasting aren't people, or things, houses and outbuildings—they're thoughts and impressions. I do believe that they can go on running down the years, scarcely changing, or at most just developing a bit. That's why the ones that don't matter just get dropped and left behind. Silly conventions—like it not being ladylike for a girl to go on the stage, or that women shouldn't smoke if they want to, or even that certain professions must be reserved for the upper classes. The real ideas last—because they are fundamentally sound."

"What kind of ideas—last, Hugh?"

He twisted round so that he faced her again, paused as if struggling with some momentary embarrassment, then said very clearly and distinctly :

"Well, mostly the thoughts that are ascribed to—to Jesus of Nazareth." Then, stretching out his hand and laying it on hers, he continued : "Don't think that I am being anything but severely practical, and don't think that I am trying to sound—good, or even religious—but I believe that the world could be run on those lines, if only we had enough pluck to try. You see, Claudia, we saw the world run on the old lines, and the results stunned us, left us dazed and bewildered—the younger generation, like Bobbie and Jane, shrugged their shoulders and said : 'Lord, what a mess it is !' and decided that they'd begin quite differently, not sticking to the old ideas, just going off and following their own plans. They aren't very good plans perhaps, but they're as good as the old ones at any rate."

"I don't believe that they've any plans at all," Claudia said.

Hugh laughed. "Who knows, that might be the best plan of all !"

She shook her head. "I don't know . . ." Then suddenly, "Hugh, d'you know that I've never talked to anyone in my life as I do to you ? I've always been with such definite—men. No, no"—as he lifted his eyebrows in silent protest—"I don't mean to be unkind, but Edward—bless him !—and Wilf, and all of them were always so concerned about *doing things*. I got into the way of it. All my life I've been rushing about doing things—selling, buying, managing. It's rather nice to be able to sit still and talk and think a bit." She added abruptly, "I wonder if you're right about that wretched curse ?"

"You're not still clinging to it, are you ? Hugging the silly worn-out exhibition of temper to your very lovely bosom ! Still wishing that Jane and Bobbie would change their ideas and come here to raise huge families !"

Claudia frowned. "I don't think that it's a thing to joke about !"

"That's just exactly what it is !" he returned. "'For'—something or other—'sorrow hath less power to bite the man who mocks at it and sets it light.' "

"Perhaps you're right. Let's go in, it's getting chilly. After all, you're young yet, you might marry, Hugh."

He glanced at her doubtfully : "I shouldn't bank on that chance, my dear. I'm too absorbed in my herbaceous borders, my dairies, and all David's lovely little inventions."

As they walked across the lawn, towards the long, rather plain house, whose windows were catching the long rays of the sun, where Stockie stood on the terrace, calling : "Cocktails ready and neither of you dressed !" Claudia said softly : "How I love it all—Marlingly, and the red bricks of the walls in the kitchen garden, the meadows, and—perhaps most of all—the moors ! Years ago, when it was all falling into decay and neglect, when the roof leaked, and the garden was over-run with laurel bushes, and the stables hadn't seen a coat of paint for years, I swore that I'd be good to it, and give it all the care it needed. Well, I've done it ! And it's paid me back—the best investment I ever made. Marlingly—and you."

"Have I been a good investment ?" he asked.

"I thought at first you were never going to pay a dividend," she said. "Then the stock rose, and now"—she put her hand on his shoulder—"it's not just an investment, it's a gilt-edged security. I've left Marlingly to you, y'know—behave decently to it, won't you ?"

"Have you ? My dear . . ." Then quickly : "Oh, don't let's talk about it. I shouldn't find it easy to be content anywhere —where you were not."

Claudia laughed, but he felt her fingers press more heavily on his shoulder, and, though her voice was mocking, Hugh heard the underlying tenderness in it when she spoke.

"Then, in spite of the fact that you don't regard—being remembered—as anything worth while, just contrive not to forget me. I should dislike it, and resent it horribly."

"It wouldn't be easy to forget you, my dearest," he said, and together they walked up the low stone steps of the terrace, and passed under the big Georgian portico to the cool hall where Stockie was waiting for them.

